Mortality and Imagination

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Mortality and Imagination

The Life of the Dead in Medieval English Literature

by

Kenneth Rooney

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This is a book not about death, but the dead, and their literary, rhetorical, and imaginative conception in a particular historical moment (the late Middle Ages) and a particular vernacular (Middle English). There has long been a need for a book-length literary history of the dead in the late medieval English period. Philippa Tristram's innovative and rewarding *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature* (1976) offers two chapters devoted to the theme of death in an expansive reading of nature, life, transience, death, and eschatology in medieval literature in English. The present study, though focused on 'figures of death', as it were, seeks more models for the dead in a greater number of texts and offers wider generic contexts too than the important studies of death in particular genres of the past four decades, to which this study is gratefully indebted: Rosemary Woolf's magisterial *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*; Douglas Gray's *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, and Takami Matsuda's *Death and Purgatory in Medieval Didactic Literature*.

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This book is for both my parents, and is dedicated to the memory of my father.

—Ken Rooney
May 2010

Author's Note

Extracts from primary texts are from the editions cited, though I do not always reproduce the editorial emendations as they appear in the sources cited and replace (in quotations from later Middle English, but not earlier Middle or Old English) all runic characters with their modern equivalents.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
EETS	Early English Text Society
e.s.	extra series
o.s.	original series
s.s.	supplementary series
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JRSAI	*Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*
Manual	*A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, ed. by J. B Severs, A. E. Hartung, and Peter Beidler, 11 vols to date (New Haven: Archon, 1957–)
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
PMLA	*Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America*
PRIA	*Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SEL	*The South English Legendary*, ed. by Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, EETS, o.s., 235, 236, 244, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1956–59)
YLS	*Yearbook of Langland Studies*

Introduction

Language, Tradition, and the Birth of the Dead

The scene is deep inside a forest. From a thicket, three ghosts emerge to confront a hunting party of three young kings, their sons. As any fathers would, they castigate their sons — powerful rulers — for their venality and pride, and, authorized now by their experience of death, discharge a warning of the brevity of life and the consequences of sin, before returning to their graves, leaving their sons chastised and reformed. So far, so conventional — this is a medieval exemplum, serviceable in part as social satire, advice for magistrates, and, more condignly, as a generalized homily on pride and preparation for death for all — all good things for a medieval moral tale to do. On these terms the tale can do little enough to unsettle us, or present admonishments that are not overtired by familiarity.

What is designed to dismay us, rather, in this short narrative, is something that I have not described, but which the narrator does, in arresting detail — the three ghosts' shocking appearance as disinterred corpses — which we can observe in the Middle English version of this narrative (one of many vernacular retellings of this pan-European tale in the Middle Ages):

> Where thai not forth gone fotis bot a fewe
> Thai fondon feldus ful fayre and fogus ful fow,
> Shoken out of a schawe thre schalkys ischeue,
> Schadows vnshene were chapid to chow,
> With lymes long and lene and leggys ful lew,
> Hadyn lost the lyp and the lyuer sethyn thai were layd lowe.[1]

[1] *The Three Dead Kings* (*De tribus regibus mortuis*), ll. 40–45, in *Alliterative Poetry of the Later Middle Ages: An Anthology*, ed. by Thorlac Turville-Petre (Washington, DC: Catholic University

(Were they not gone forth but a few feet
They found fields full fair and meadows many-hued;
Sheer out of a shaw three shapes issue,
Shadows unsheen they were shapéd to show
With limbs long and lean and legs full frail
That had lost both lip and liver since they were laid low.)

Two succinct parts denote abominable wholes: a mouth cavity widened, and an abdomen opened by the progress of posthumous decay. Later, the dead kings will bewail their macabre appearance more comprehensively, in language of brusque biological realism: 'Lo here the wormus in my wome! [...] Lokis on my bonus that blak bene and bare!' (ll. 98, 106). This establishes the figures of the dead as, crucially, *macabre*, and demonstrates a way of imagining the dead in earlier literature that is to be the focus of this book: the macabre idiom — a renewed mode, allusive of new iconography, of formulating and disseminating the traditional language and store of images of human mortality.

This would not be the first time that medieval audiences would have had their imaginations drawn to the physical miseries of the dead. These were themes rehearsed in some of the earliest Christian sermons and transmitted, in English, in Anglo-Saxon imitations of Caesarius of Arles and Pseudo-Augustine, themselves authorized by scriptural language: the Bible's own book of mortality, Job, and even Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. In these early Christian sermons, audiences were enjoined to think objectively of the repellent transformations of the body in death, and to imagine the dead themselves speak. In one example, the ninth homily of the tenth-century Vercelli Homilies, the dead are rhetorically anthropomorphized, uttering a warning of the future of all flesh, just like their imaginative descendants in *The Three Dead Kings*, continuing a line of literary and rhetorical posthumous sentience ultimately descending from classical epitaphs: 'Viator, viator, quod tu es ego fui' (Wayfarer, wayfarer — what you are now, I was once).

It is this figure of rhetoric witnessed in sermon literature — the imagined speaking of dry bones — which constitutes the imaginative and rhetorical tradition behind the narrative of the three macabre dead kings which emerges in the early fourteenth century. The more obvious generic tradition behind the

of America Press, 1989), pp. 148–57. Translation is my own. Subsequent citations of this Middle English text are cited as *The Three Dead Kings*; references to the international medieval artistic and literary theme are cited as *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, or the *Legend*.

tale — the 'ghost story' or revelatory apparition — is a literary staple, witnessed in tale collections, saints' lives, chronicles, and compendia throughout the Middle Ages. Such a narrative model is less influential here, however, as a means for imagining the physical condition of the dead. Typically, the medieval ghost story is not concerned with the effects of death on the body, but rather of the consequences for the soul. Narratives such as those collected in courtly collections like Walter Map's *De nugis curialium* and Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia imperialia* would — in a more anomalous mode — recount how a corpse would stagger from its grave to molest the living (to no apparent instructive purpose); or, more typically, how the dead would appear, spiritually, as a vision disclosed from Hell, Purgatory, or Heaven, for more decidedly instructive purposes.[2] These dead, however, would generally appear to the living recognizable as they were in life, displaying instead of evidence of physical decomposition, physically inscribed tokens of spiritual damnation, purgation, or salvation. The 'macabre' bodies of *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*, however, display the body naturalistically at the physical moment when no one would, or should, want to see it — transformed by putrefaction — a physical state periphrastically realized in the Middle English text in the description of the corpses as lipless, liverless, and emaciated. This state constitutes a moment of such visceral horror, and a moment so transitory, that it must be recorded in both text and image; and it is. The young men, we are told by the English text, memorialize the story of their fathers' appearance in a church mural. Thus we have the foundational legend of not only the idea of the macabre, but also of the process of its dissemination as a dual literary *and* iconographic theme in the later Middle Ages in Europe: exemplary narrative for books, or to accompany the Office of the Dead in books of hours; exemplary picture for wider audiences on church walls. The *Legend* thus becomes a multi-media cultural theme, predicated on an image (whether

[2] For a 'spiritual vision', see 'The Two Clerks of Nantes', in William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by R. A. B. Mynors and others, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998–99). Recent studies have shed new light upon the appearance of the dead in Latin chronicles and tale collections of the twelfth-century Renaissance by insular and Continental writers such as William of Malmesbury, Gervase of Tilbury, and Walter Map, coeval with the establishment of the new doctrines of Purgatory. See C. S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Nancy Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants, and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past and Present*, 152 (1996), 3–45; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and also Andrew Joynes's anthology of translations of medieval ghost literature, *Medieval Ghost Stories* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), discussed below.

articulated in words or pigment), which, while not in any sense inventing the language of bodily decay, still renews and recontextualizes this refrain of sermon literature in a wider cultural effort, in the doubling of verbal imagery by visual art. As a purely literary exercise, too, the narrative redeploys sermon themes in the generic language of romance (homily becomes adventure) and in its narrating the emergence of the three dead from the forest of romance narrative, the text highlights an awareness of the ways previously rhetorical and hortatory tropes — the language of bodily decay — can be redirected to the ends of narrative and poetic art. If, in other words, the *Legend* does not represent innovation in the kind of language used, then it does in how it is used.

The portrayal of the dead of *The Three Dead Kings* is an emphatic departure from the kinds of dead commonly portrayed in the collections of medieval stories mentioned above, the normal medium for witnessing the dead in dialogue with the living from a third-person narrative perspective. The *Legend*, in its rhetoric of bodily description, brings the full weight of a homiletic tradition to the appearance of the deceased. To be sure, medieval ghost stories would frequently accord moral signification to the appearance of the dead — a burning cloak of unbearable weight here (denotative in one example of its theft in life), a tormenting animal nestling there — in betokening of the soul's punishment. In *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*, however, the deceased are made newly unrecognizable (to those who should know them) by the sheer biological (as opposed to spiritual) consequences of death.

Paradoxically, these dead are made newly recognizable to all in their capacity as articulated homilies — not simply on the destiny of souls, but also of the flesh — both messages now integrated into a single semiotic. This is a merging of eschatology and of homiletic discourse on human pride found elsewhere only in the medieval debates of Body and Soul, a rich tradition in Latin homiletic literature, and which exists in medieval English writing on either side of the Norman Conquest. The narrative of *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead* accordingly represents a reformulation and compression of the familiar themes deployed in the Body and Soul debates — the destiny of the soul and the corruption (moral and physical) of the body — tethered now to the familiar narrative formula of stories of apparitions. Moreover, these revenant dead are articulated cadavers, conceived in the macabre idiom — fully engaged with an iconographic model — which, while becoming increasingly apparent by the beginning of the fourteenth century, operates in the longstanding rhetorical tradition of the *contemptus mundi* theme. *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* is in fact the first widespread appearance of the iconographic formulation of the

macabre, as well as a popular exemplum; it represents a further imaginative dissemination of the *contemptus mundi* trope and a renewed and newly accentuated interest in the moral, poetic, and aesthetic implications of witnessing the corruption of the body. Put simply, after centuries of rhetorical injunctions for audiences to see the dead, iconographers, by the end of the thirteenth century, are now willing to assist in the process. The engagement of English vernacular writing, across genres, with this iconography and the set of ideas and language associated with it, are at the centre of this book.

What should the 'macabre' mean, then, as a mode of imaginative representation? What we have seen in the figures of the three dead kings is the 'macabre' cadaver; the body which we, as modern readers, think we readily recognize, but yet don't quite recognize as medieval audiences would have. Nor would we embrace it as one late medieval English monarch, exceptionally, tried to. Edward IV (r. 1461–83, with interruptions) willed for his memorial a double *transi* tomb, a juxtaposition of his lifelike, recumbent effigy with an effigy of a rotting cadaver, testifying: '[W]e will oure body be buried lowe in the ground, and upon the same a stone to bee laide and wroght with the figure of Deth [...] and upon the same tumbe an Image of oure figure.'[3] Notice how Edward does not conceive the cadaver as a representation of himself, but more abstractly, as *death*; an imaginative decorum mandated by the formal language of a will, as if to verbally and rhetorically insulate the idea of the king's body from corruption even while the imaginative goal was indeed to corrupt the king's body, in sculpted mimesis. For a monarch to associate the monument of the king's sacred body with an ostentatious emblem of corruption appeared a bridge too far for those charged with effecting this exercise in dynastic memory, too much, as Paul Binski has observed, of a threat 'to the ideological integrity of the body politic'; too much 'a crack in the Mirror of Princes'.[4] Edward's request was ignored, but rotting cadavers were indeed adopted by middle-ranking gentry and high-ranking clergy in Western Europe (continental and insular), and never it seems, princes of the blood. There are exceptions, however, to which we will return: René of Anjou (see below, Conclusion), and Louis XII and Anne of Brittany (see below, Chapter 1).

For medieval audiences, this figure — the *transi* — or, to use the only recurring medieval English idiom associated with it, 'the image of death', was something more sensational, and more *sensual*, and more corrupt in its physical attributes

[3] Quoted in Mark Duffy, *Royal Tombs of Medieval England* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003), p. 255.

[4] See Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum, 1996), pp. 150–51.

than what we would read as simply an animated skeleton. This kind of 'sterilized' skeleton is now a cliché — whether found in filmed versions of Dickens's *Christmas Carol* (though not in that novel's actual ambiguous description), or even wartime propaganda posters.[5] What we see, however, in *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead* is the shock of putrefaction; of realizing, as if for the first time, what happens to flesh in death, of apprehending the shock of seeing what it looks like as it dissolves, and furthermore of seeing this transitional, obscene state appropriated as the physical form, not only of the 'animated' dead, but the dead we know. We do not, in this late fourteenth-century narrative, experience the knowing ironies of pliable deaths-heads that Renaissance and baroque drama and art leave us with. To be sure, the one use, earnest and admonitory, leads to the later one, which is sardonically and imaginatively responsive to the exhaustions of longstanding literary and artistic commonplaces. But I want to begin, as it were, with the birth of an idea — with the imaginative and moral implications of reading dead bodies in early vernacular literature — before they really do begin to go imaginatively stale.

I have said that the story I have just summarized, *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead Kings*, widespread in medieval Europe, is the foundational narrative of the macabre idiom: the text and the image that provokes a late medieval and Renaissance culture of imagining the dead in a precisely formulated and remorselessly *physical* configuration as horrifyingly decomposed. What this book will do — gauge imaginative and rhetorical art in wielding the memory and presence of dead in medieval English writing — will be anchored in assessing the significance and generic pliability of this one mannerism of imagining the dead (in writing about them, painting, and sculpting them), in this period. Though the macabre is the idea we begin and end with in this discussion, it is not one to which all expressions of late medieval mortality can be simplistically reduced. By the same token, I will not read from the particular to the general and assert an obliterating and deterministic aesthetic force in medieval society in representing the dead; my argument is predicated on what we can infer in terms of the politics of taste, or literary and rhetorical choice. There are, and were always, many ways to imagine the dead. My discussion hopes to shed contextual light on literary taste in the choice of the macabre idiom, and its implications for reading and response. Medieval audiences would have been quite content to read physical corruption as

[5] See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. by Helen Weaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 110, on the distinction to be drawn between the dried-out skeleton of the early-modern imagination and the corrupt *transi* of the medieval and Renaissance periods.

denotative of inherent moral corruption. Modern readings of this art have at times extended this mode of interpretation to a degree that reads a corrupt aesthetic or degenerate zeitgeist in this recurrent pattern of imagining the dead, not least Johan Huizinga, whose history of late medieval Europe, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, charts a culture of decay with as much an eye to his inter-war present as any imagined decadence in fifteenth-century northern European culture. The contrary would surely be the case. Rather than any index of aesthetic corruption and imaginative sterility in society at large, the art of the macabre represents something more energetic, enervating, and (paradoxically) revivifying.

This book, a study of language and imagery in medieval English writing on death, will find narrative and representational art at work in frequent dialogue with the idea of the macabre — in the repudiation of it as much as the allusion to it. *Macabre* is a term of the utmost convenience, partly anachronistic, and I use it deliberately to describe ideas that predate the artistic theme which gives it its name. These are considerations that I will clarify below, but for now we must accept, as it were, a working definition of the macabre that sees a cultural commonplace of imagining the dead, which extends in both directions in time from its taxonomic establishment with the early fifteenth-century *Danse Macabré*, or Dance of Death (hereafter unaccented, *Danse Macabre*). Therefore we must read texts concerning the dead retrospectively, going back from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and describe as 'macabre' the muscular homiletic and satirical language that operates without any reference to a known visual idiom (other than imagined natural imagery) to didactically dissolve the body and anneal audiences of pride and security in the things of the world. The second direction, moving forwards in time from the fourteenth century through the Renaissance (and beyond) is properly 'macabre': this idiom operates in the context of an established iconographic convention. This tradition of the macabre, whether antedating or postdating the arrival of the term is the popular effect — the vernacularization — of part of a medieval rhetorical tradition rooted in the commonplaces of *contemptus mundi*. To help repudiate the world, this medieval sermon theme repudiates the human body, with the brusque strategy of documenting its nauseating attributes in death (as well as in life). These are the attributes that the iconography of the dead in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries — in *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* and the *Danse Macabre* — enthusiastically codifies and embellishes in a visual idiom. This book will trace the ways in which this macabre tradition, in its widest sense, provides an imaginative frame of reference for how writers in English, across genres, grapple with the language of physical dereliction and human transience in realizing the narrative and poetic potential of the dead in vernacular texts.

In *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, three derelict corpses stand before the living, not simply to speak of the end of life but to *show* it. Their objective as sermon is secondary to their physical objectification as a kind of monitory art to show that the ends of death, always infinitely prolonged in medieval religious belief in narratives of Purgatory, Hell, and Paradise, are finally quite simple and verifiable: physical corruption and abandonment. This is a simple abbreviation and representation of the laconic refrains of medieval sermons and didactic lyrics.

How rhetoric exhumes the dead, how human apprehension animates them, and how art and language codifies them will be the focus of this study. What we begin and end with is a style of envisioning the dead defined by physical and emotional realism — the fundamental attribute of the macabre. What we will return to are the appearances of bodies still bound to our experience, either unburied or exhumed by imagination, and a rather different category of bodies that inhabit our world: revenants. The dead, who inhabit the medieval Otherworld in all its topographies — Hell, Purgatory, Heaven — will not be the theme of this book. We will need to step outside these conceptual boundaries from time to time, but what I will trace here is the language of corruption and fear that substantiates the dead for medieval audiences in a mode of narrative realism and visual repugnance, both before and after an artistic idiom took the task upon itself of disseminating the image to the point of cliché, even at the moment of its own flourishing. The *Danse Macabre* (as we will discuss in detail later) is satire, and its object is man and his pretensions; principally his pretension to live. The decayed corpse becomes, in this context, the jester to Everyman. The gap, however, between a satire that is fundamentally earnest in its objective (that man does need to be reminded of his futility, but that this can be done entertainingly and arrestingly with an animated corpse, which maintains its own authority as sign) and between a cultural register that sees the macabre as a vehicle which is in itself corrupt and absurd (as in, say, the Jacobean *Revenger's Tragedy* — lively with mistreated, but poisonous, skulls) can appear small.

Nonetheless, if we cite *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* as a beginning, we should identity it more properly as a renewed one, a revivification of an idea that had been conceived in classical Roman art. This visual idiom, commensurate with a literary interest in mortality, conceived in epitaphs, lyrics, and narrative, in writers such as Horace and Petronius is arguably the beginning of the European macabre. If it is, then it lies quiescent (as a visual idiom) for a millennium. The first-century mosaic of a recumbent cadaver (which now resides in the Palazzo alle Terme in Rome) is the ancestor of the medieval *transi*. Rome

gives us the culture of the macabre's interrupted beginning, offering traces of imagined recumbent cadavers, death's-head allegories (such as those in the summer triclinium in Pompeii), and skeleton-butlers in art (such as those in Petronius's *Satyricon*).

Death, of course, is a universal theme, and no one book can hope to treat it comprehensively (although Philippe Ariès has come closest in his hugely influential volume *The Hour of Our Death*). My book treats a specific aspect of human death — the literary and iconographic 'imagination' of the dead body. It is a commonplace of historically informed discussion that the casual conception of late medieval society as a culture dominated by death and its memory requires the most rigorous of qualifications. This book, by the same token, does not seek a totalizing, homogenous cultural excavation where art, narrative, and sculpture march in unison (as if in their own Dance of Death) to a uniform aesthetic — obsession with decay and a 'vermifluous' imagination of the dead. I am concerned rather to explore the politics of taste implicit in any text's negotiation with a widespread idea. The engagement of literature with such commonplaces demands specific questions. What are the patterns and implications of the response of language and imagination to the significations of the bodies of the dead and the destinations of the dead? What are the effects of the generic and ideological presentation of these ideas? Tracing the literary life of the dead necessitates exploring questions of literary decorum and the capacities of genre and narrative in earlier literatures. To explore how a repellent theme is promoted and (re)presented for its audiences, over time, can yield significant insights for reading cultural change and the transmission of ideas and language. Thus we will ask, how is a popular (if repellent) artistic image verbalized and recontextualized in different genres and modes? Is macabre art invoked explicitly or merely allusively? What does this say about the popularity of this theme — across texts and across materials and forms? To take only one example, the tale with which we began this section, the 'founding' image of the macabre — *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* — can be traced in its inter-material and intertextual contexts over time, from Latin exemplum to vernacular vision, to vernacularizing image (in manuscript and mural), to further diffusion and vernacularization in English romance. Audiences in fourteenth-century England may well have been more likely to have seen a parochial mural of the theme rather than hear a reading of this mannered alliterative English poem on the subject; the theme was particularly popular in insular churches in the fourteenth century. The appearance of the macabre idiom in medieval art is itself a response (or 'crystallization', as the historian Johan Huizinga put it; see Chapter 4, below) to the traditional rhetoric of transience,

but this stylized iconographic formula is then itself reincorporated in literature, in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English texts such as the alliterative English *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* in the manuscript of John Audelay, and *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms* in BL, MS Additional 37049, which presents a female personification of the *transi* tomb combined in the same manuscript with a plethora of 'vernacularizing' sketches of cadavers, and of one other (male) tomb.

Prior to the iconography's reiteration of these ideas, the traditional language of bodily decay is best presented in the vernacular by the lyrics of mortality, often designed to accompany sermons or replace them in programmes of private devotion. Thereafter, text, image, and performance, never divisible from church decoration or programmes of exegesis prior to the Reformation, remain illustrative 'aids' to the sermon mode of discourse on mortality, echoing and distilling sermon language for memorialization. Yet the reason for the relative delay in certain eschatological formulae (the corruption of the body) joining its peers in programmes of church decoration — the Last Judgement, the life and death of Christ, and the saints — must remain an object of speculation. It is a delayed movement perhaps attributable in part to an increasingly pessimistic turn of outlook from a Christianity emphatic, in its cultural exercises, of Christ's heroism, to one commemorative of his suffering and physical destruction, as much as his resurrection. The figure of the crucified Christ casts a shadow over all Christian discourse, and that of human mortality is no exception. Their doctrinal interweaving is demonstrated in the late medieval and Renaissance iconography of Adam's relics. Adam, imagined in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus to await the refreshment of Christ's blood after millennia in Hell, is seen as a jumble of bones at the foot of Christ's cross. As the fashion for macabre realism and response gains strength in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries this collection of bones is elaborated so that 'Adam' can be replaced by a full-scale, putrid *gisant* — a recumbent male body, unrealistically still in the process of decomposition rather than constituting time-bleached bones. One example, one half of an altarpiece diptych now in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, by Geertgen tot St Jans, dating from the turn of the sixteenth century, shows a handsomely proportioned macabre cadaver: the macabre doppelganger to Christ's pendant, dying (but still living) body. Another example, by Lucas Cranach, imagines Adam as a partially exhumed cadaver, decayed, yet still covered in mummified flesh, whose head rests at the foot of the Cross. Tantalus-like, the corpse opens its parched mouth to receive drops of Christ's blood, a macabre, imaginative telescoping of the spirit of Adam who awaits refreshment in Hell.

Thus, even before iconographers firmly inscribe the ligaments of dead flesh and worms for their audiences, the art of seeing that which is not pleasant to see in the body resides in the ekphrastic capacities of *descriptio* applied to the human corpse. The most significant vernacular generic grouping that aids interpretation of this aspect of morbid language outside of the sermon is medieval lyric poetry. Here, the lyrical capacities of voice, perspective, and image aid the promotion of imaginative conceptions of what it is like to be dead. By turns the strategies of speakers aid subjectivizing the experience of death or objectifying it — or to put it more simply, the speaker/sermonist urges us by turns to 'see' *our own* deaths or 'see' the deaths of *others*. Medieval dialogue poetry (the Old English *Soul and Body* is one preeminent example) lyrics, and some later Renaissance elegies (including Henry King's *Exequy*) imaginatively describe the physical effects of death amid their monitory or commemorative strategies. Invocatory of biological realism (however formulaic) as these examples are, they are not *imitative* of the artistic macabre idiom, but (in the earlier examples to the thirteenth century) anticipatory. Thus, in certain lyrical contexts, words can 'suffice', as it were, without reference to a visual idiom, to emphasize, to the exclusion of eschatological complexities, the most immediate and verifiable aspects of death — bodily corruption. It is the imaginative and hortatory power of this image to which we will return: an image for which a direct imaginative line can be traced through the widest traditions of lyrical writing on death from the Old English *Soul and Body*, through *some* of the Middle English lyrics of mortality — those that exclude the mechanical (but consolatory) processes of Purgatory — to promote monitory severity and imaginative anxiety by a close imaginative focus on the bodies of the dead. We might argue that this movement is more pragmatic and ideologically driven in the case of Renaissance lyrics, which, post-Reformation, 'can' and 'must' dispense with Purgatory, but for medieval poetry — operating in the Age of Purgatory — these strategies of eliding any consolation in the presence of Purgatory suggest poets, working across time, with thematic materials which can be exploited to evoke nuanced varieties of anxiety, both doctrinal and instinctive. I have spoken already about how the 'idea' of the macabre as a visual manner of representing the dead — pitilessly portraying the dead at their physical worst in the period after they have died and have not yet fully decayed — predates the origin of the term *macabre* itself, which (with only one exception, in a cryptic, late fourteenth-century allusion by the French poet Le Fèvre, for which see below) first appears in the context of the medieval *Danse Macabre*, or Dance of Death — the fifteenth-century literary and iconographic trope which depicts the dead (or Death) dancing with the living. 'Macabre', originally an epithet applied only to

this dance of the dead, becomes retrospectively not only a term to describe art wholly inspired by the portrayal of the dead, but later in modern citations, any form of horror in any sense reflective of morbidity. What I will refer to as the 'macabre idiom' is the iconographic image of the decaying corpse in the visual context, and in a literary context, any narrative suggestive of this visual manner of representing the corpse stricken by the attributes of decay. Even though this macabre visual idiom originates in the late thirteenth century with representations of the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, and with the iconographic representation of the dead in *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* in the early fourteenth, it gains a taxonomic concreteness only with the *Danse Macabre* of the early fifteenth century. This retrospective application of the term *macabre* to all art of the corpse in the medieval period which I adhere to in this study does not necessarily entail a wilful anachronism. According to Johan Huizinga (the twentieth-century historian whose work did so much to link the 'degenerate' late Middle Ages with the idea of the macabre), this 'decadent' art of the dead, in 'the sentiment it embodies [...] is precisely the conception of death which arose in the later Middle Ages'. Thus, 'at the close of the Middle Ages the whole vision of death may be summed up in the word *macabre*, in its modern meaning'.[6] Rosemary Woolf, too, is content to describe aspects of some of the imagery of the thirteenth-century English debate between the Body and Soul 'Als I Lay' (see below, Chapter 3) as 'macabre' in its imaginative articulation of a staggering corpse.[7] Woolf, in her 1968 study of the medieval English religious lyric, observes in regard to later medieval poetry on death:

> In many ways fifteenth-century poetry is reticent and discreetly evasive about the horrors of death. In so far as some of it may seem more macabre than earlier poetry, this springs, not from the presentation of horrific and realistic detail, but from the dependency on iconographic forms.[8]

It is the relative dependency and contribution of macabre art to the language of decay, and vice versa, that this study will engage with. The macabre idiom, once codified iconographically, is not a formula whose usage impoverishes literature to the detriment of poetic imagination and achievement, but becomes rather an example of the allusive qualities of medieval literature.

[6] Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. by F. Hopman (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), p. 129.

[7] Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 100.

[8] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 311.

Yet, inasmuch as it is an obvious overstepping of the mark to say that all literary figurations of the dead derive from the macabre idiom, it should also be stressed that in a wider social and cultural context, visceral human horror of the dead is not dependant on the idea of the macabre. By the same token, that to which the macabre idiom lends visual expression — the traditional sermon discourses of disdain for the body in the setting of eschatological anxiety — has a long pedigree. Rosemary Woolf is correct when she remarks of the lyric genre that in the thirteenth century:

> [T]here was as yet no iconographic portrayal of death or the dead: the visual reference was manifestly not to art but to personal experience. But very often in the later lyric either visual reference is avoided or the reference is to funeral monuments [...] or to iconographic inventions such as the Three Living and the Three Dead.[9]

By the end of the thirteenth century, the macabre cadaver begins to appear in the context of apocalyptic iconography.[10] It can be hazarded that this early visual manifestation of the macabre indicates the beginnings of the increasing currency of the macabre body as an artistic form which elaborates and formalizes any 'background visual knowledge' of the dead held by audiences. Even if it is literary imagination verbally realized and not iconographic references that are at work in earlier morbid discourse, there is still no reason to refrain from discussing such works as a 'response' to the macabre spirit, particularly if we regard the macabre as a new response to traditional morbidity.

Ultimately, whatever the impulse for formulating the template of the macabre cadaver in the second half of the thirteenth century, surely 'personal experience' is required for the iconographic image to be first devised, as much as 'personal experience' provides the frame of reference for discourse concerning the mortal body in the period that precedes this artistic motif. The macabre idiom, as we have said, is a response to pre-existing didactic discourses on mortality, discourses whose principal theme was the frailty of the body in life *and* in death. The didactic spurning of mortal flesh is not new in this context, and is only enhanced, not supplanted, with the arriving visual vogue of the macabre, where the dead are de-familiarized and objectified in a newer, more viscerally affective means of

[9] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 310.

[10] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 336 n. 3. More recent studies such as Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 186–96, and *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*, ed. by Frances Carey (London: British Museum, 1999), pp. 78–83, place these apocalyptic figurations of cadaverous death in the thirteenth century. See below, Chapter 6.

expressing the horror of death. The morbid strain of penitential discourse may be understood to acquire a new mode of expression, a new pictorial vocabulary, with the arrival of the macabre. In this instance it is the iconography which is new, not the vocabulary. Such iconography does not necessarily indicate pervasive cultural obsession with the corpse, but rather signals the workings of a rich, Christian, cultural backdrop, which in its essence is *vibrant*, not morbid, one which *needed* its reminders of death to 'instil a fear of the grave which is so lamentably lacking, not to indulge one which has grown obsessive'.[11] As a culture that permitted its religious, artistic, and literary imagination to be channelled in baffling directions, it is one also which thrived in every disparate evocation of the grotesque, and in which the dead, in all their literary and artistic guises, form a part in their later medieval, macabre representation which persist long after the 'waning' of the Middle Ages.

Such 'macabre' representations of the dead might invite classification under the modern genre of horror, for which the term *macabre* today (perhaps misleadingly) serves as a synonym. The affiliation of the word *macabre* with more modern concepts of supernatural horror — the sense in which it is most readily used today — is a rather more recent and romantic one. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s earliest citation of this latter sense is from 1889, and the current synonymy of horror and macabre is ubiquitous; yet people of the late Middle Ages (at the term's first appearance) in England and France would have understood 'macabre' to refer to nothing other than the Dance of Death. Nowhere in Middle or Early Modern English is the term known to be used as an epithet generally denotative of the physical qualities of the dead. The adjective that comes closest to fulfilling this sense of the preternaturally vile is the Middle English *grisly*, or *grisliche*, deriving from the etymologically obscure Old English *grisleic*. This is a word that *is* used to denote the horrifying appearance of the dead in Middle English, but it can also describe the ugliness of a great deal else such as, bathetically, the 'grisly' rocks of Chaucer's 'Franklin's Tale'. Such range of reference would apply to its semantic approximates in the noun *horror* and the verb *drede*. *Macabre* at least confines its substantive and adjectival senses to ideas evocative of the dead, and is therefore the best a limited English lexicon can bring to bear. Its earliest known appearance (and sole semantic reference until the modern period), in the form of the trisyllabic *machabree* for Old French *macabré*, is in

[11] Derek Pearsall, 'Signs of Life in Lydgate's *Danse Macabre*', in *Zeit, Tod und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance Literatur*, ed. by James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana, 117 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Americanistik, 1987), pp. 58–71 (p. 67).

John Lydgate's translation of the *Danse Macabre*; the modern form is now usually 'macabre'. Lydgate's English translation of the original French text of the Dance (existing in two versions) was taken from the text of the first known Dance of Death, the mural of the *Danse* painted (with verses) in the charnel house of the Church of the Holy Innocents in Paris in 1424. He made it, he tells us, for the mural of the Dance of Death completed at St Paul's in London in 1430 (and indeed the Dance consequently became known in England as the Dance of Paul's).[12]

It is not known whether text or image came first in the *Danse Macabre*.[13] Moreover, the exact etymological derivation of the term *macabre* remains obscure. The Old French word first occurs in the jurist and poet Jean Le Fèvre's long poem *Respit de la mort*, written on his recovery from a near-fatal illness at the age of fifty, around the year 1376. Here he writes: '[J]e fis de Macabré la Danse' (I have done [or made] the dance of Macabré).[14] This could mean that he has set words (elsewhere) to a Dance by an artist named Macabré, or that he is ruminating that he has 'done' the dance of death, that is, come close to death, if we assume that the *Danse Macabre* was known at this early stage as a dance of death. However, no text of a dance of death by Le Fèvre is extant, and crucially, the first recorded text of the *Danse Macabre* is extant only from 1424, several decades after *Le Respit*, in the French mural of the Dance in the cemetery of the Church of Holy Innocents in Paris. We cannot be sure if Le Fèvre refers to a now unrecorded antecedent of the *Danse Macabre* of Paris, but it seems likely he expected the term, whatever its precise reference in 1376, to be understood in some context of human mortality. It has been hypothesized that the Arabic *maqabir*, meaning 'graves', or the Hebrew word for grave digger (*meqabar*) might be the source of the Paris Dance Macabré, given that Jewish burial societies were known to perform 'pantomimes' of death in Paris at this time.[15] Macabré is, however, recorded as a surname at this

[12] Editions of the English Lydgatian translation are *The Dance of Death*, ed. by Frances Warren, EETS, o.s., 181 (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), and *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey*, ed. by Eleanor Hammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1927; repr. New York: Octagon, 1969). For an account of the Dance's function as an inscriptional text, and of Lydgate's other writings intended for the accompaniment of images, see A. S. G. Edwards, 'Middle English Inscriptional Verse Texts', in *Texts and their Contexts*, ed. by John Scattergood and Julia Boffey (Dublin: Four Courts, 1997), pp. 26–43.

[13] J. M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1950), p. 90.

[14] Clark, *The Dance of Death*, p. 91.

[15] Riane Eisler, 'Danse Macabre', *Traditio*, 6 (1948), 187–225, qtd. in Pearsall, 'Signs of Life', p. 62.

time in France, and most authorities now take 'Macabre' to be a proper name, perhaps of a poet whose writings came to be associated with the Dance of Death, or of the artist who first painted the mural.[16]

It seems that Lydgate too would have regarded 'Macabre' as a proper noun; he uses the term as such, in the prologue to his translation of the *Dance*, referring to the name either of the putative Innocents' muralist or verse writer where he writes: 'I toke on me to translaten al Owte of the frensshe Macabrees daunce.' Stanza 81 in the Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 53 text of Lydgate's *Dance* is colophoned as the speech of 'Machabre the doctour' — the author of the Dance which Lydgate translates. Certainly, by the middle of the fifteenth century, English audiences are not only provided with texts entitled *Daunce of Macabre*, but are urged to 'remembwr of the dawnce of makabre' in one Carthusian manuscript, MS Add. 37049 (fol. 31^{v}), a book which, in its texts and illustrations, offers a conspectus of the possible ways of seeing death and the dead sharing the same distressed body, and a manuscript to which we shall return.

If, indeed, the word *macabre* was never used by early texts to describe the dead, why should it be chosen here to describe an idiom of representing the dead, when other provisional terms (like 'the image of death') seem to have enjoyed currency? The art of the macabre, an art exclusively dedicated to the dead themselves, is, I suggest, the ideal frame of reference for investigating any literary discourse in this period concerned exclusively with the dead. The macabre is a cultural phenomenon constituting something more than mere horror in the modern sense, potentially evoking in part a morbid apprehension devoted exclusively to those who no longer live, but could yet return.

According to Augustine, in his *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, Christianity was not supposed to recognize the idea of ghosts or the return of the dead, short of the Last Judgement. The waking, walking dead were a verifiably pagan phenomenon. But as the historian Jean-Claude Schmitt has shown, this doctrinal stance was steadily undermined, beginning with the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (a seminal text for the propagation of medieval ghost stories), in a process that gathered steam through the chronicles of Franconian ecclesiastical establishments from the sixth century, and which achieved wide circulation at last in the thirteenth century, when mendicant preachers began to disseminate ghost stories altogether exuberantly in their preaching manuals amid the promulgation of the doctrine of Purgatory.[17] Christianity, it seems, a religion which superseded all its

[16] Clark, *The Dance of Death*, pp. 91, 119.

[17] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, chaps 1 and 2.

pagan antecedents as one to offer the certainty of immortality, could not shun the revenant dead, beings whose persistent haunting of the human imagination has always been prompted by the human impossibility of severing ties with the dead completely. Thus the dead return to the living in well-established folkloric, classical, and medieval literary modes long before the establishment of a newer iconographic idiom for an aspect of their representation in the later Middle Ages with the advent of the macabre. The fear of the dead and of the predations of an imaginatively anthropomorphized Death are at last, amid aims that were paradoxically consolatory, formally and boldly mediated in the stylized confluence of the living and the dead of the *Danse Macabre*, a theme that persists well into the early modern period.

This book therefore traces the literary reception of the dead in their contextual and cultural position in relation to the idea of the macabre. Chapter 1, before examining the literary depiction of the 'inert' cadaver, considers the root of the idea of the macabre, by examining the social, historical, and artistic reception and objectification of the human corpse as the macabre *transi*: the object that ultimately becomes the figure of Death, as well as the symbol of death *in* Man. Chapter 2, proceeding from literary representations of the inert corpse as the silent, implicit warning of the dead, seeks to examine the *dramatic* warning of the dead, articulated in their supernatural return. We examine here the seeming *physical* return of the dead in Middle English narratives. Though not every example will be found to constitute a verifiably physical eruption from the grave, even the more ambiguously realized incursions of the dead into the world of the living suggestively configure them as macabre, if not strictly corporeal *transis*. The idea of the fear of the dead — necrophobia, as cultural historians and archaeologists have termed it — is a way of critically engaging with these narratives which configure the dead as a site of anxiety, even if they do not always realize this with visual references predicated on macabre imagery.[18] This chapter therefore examines the dead both as they suggest themselves as macabre entities and as animated bodies which do not expressly conform to the macabre idiom.

Notions of corporeality and the quality of spirits are considered more fully in Chapter 3, which assesses the imaginative and narrative reception of the spiritual revenant, or disembodied ghost, arguably the archetypal mode for the return of the dead, recognizably persisting from classical sources. Yet the imaginative formulation of the spiritual dead can never be divorced from somatic models

[18] See Anastasia Tsaliki, 'Unusual Burials and Necrophobia', in *Deviant Burial and the Archaeological Record*, ed. by Eileen M. Murphy (Oxford: Oxbow, 2008), pp. 1–16.

which are contingent on the idea of the physical body — macabre or otherwise — a problem particularly evident in the enormously popular theme of the debate of the Body and Soul.

Having seen in part of Chapter 3 (in the debate of the Body and Soul) how the dead rhetorically address not the living but themselves, we will examine in detail in Chapter 4 an illustrated Middle English adaptation of the Body and Soul debate: *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms*. We will read this text not only in the extraordinary iconographic milieu it inhabits and quotes from, but also alongside a cognate rhetorical theme which I characterize as 'a complaint of the buried body'; what Rosemary Woolf describes as 'the warning from the tomb'.[19] With this text we will consider how the dead human body, imitative of the dialogues between itself and the parted soul examined in Chapter 3, interrogates only itself in this genre and its analogues. From an illustration in Chapters 2 and 3 of the consequences of death on those who have predeceased us, and their testimony from the afterlife, we are urged by the texts of Chapter 4 as well as by the Body and Soul dialogues in Chapter 3, to imagine what it is like to be dead, to internalize the affective, imagined experience not merely of dying, but of the physical reality of death itself.

Chapter 5 closely examines two critical junctures of the macabre within two extended Middle English narratives. *The Three Dead Kings*, whose importance for the culture of the macabre we have already discussed, is reassessed here as the exemplary model for the *The Awntyrs off Arthure* — an Arthurian romance into which is inserted a ghost story revisualized in the macabre mode — effectively the parental apparition of *The Three Dead Kings*. It will be seen how both alliterative poets employ the same language and narrative structures to deploy death in the midst of life, and to convey the macabre iconographic idiom solely in words, in a mode of ekphrasis.

How (anticipated by Chapter 5), the allegorical figure of Death adopts the mantle of the corpse in its literary embodiments is our theme in Chapter 6. In discussing the personification of death, we will see how the dead and the figure of Death are at times difficult to detach from each other — one readily signifying the other in medieval thought. The variety of Death's allegorical forms in medieval and Renaissance English is documented here and finally related to an account of the English Dance of Death, where, as with its European versions, the dead and Death merge and dance with the living. We begin, however, where any interpretation of the macabre must begin: with its birthplace — the dead human body.

[19] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 351; see Chapter 7, below, for more on this.

Plates

Plate 1. Giovanni Buffalmacco, *Trionfo della Morte* (detail, *Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*), mid-fourteenth century. Pisa, Campo Santo. Photo © SCALA, Florence.

Plate 2. 'Take hede unto my figure here abowne', first half of fifteenth century. British Library, MS Additional 37049, fol. 32^{v}.

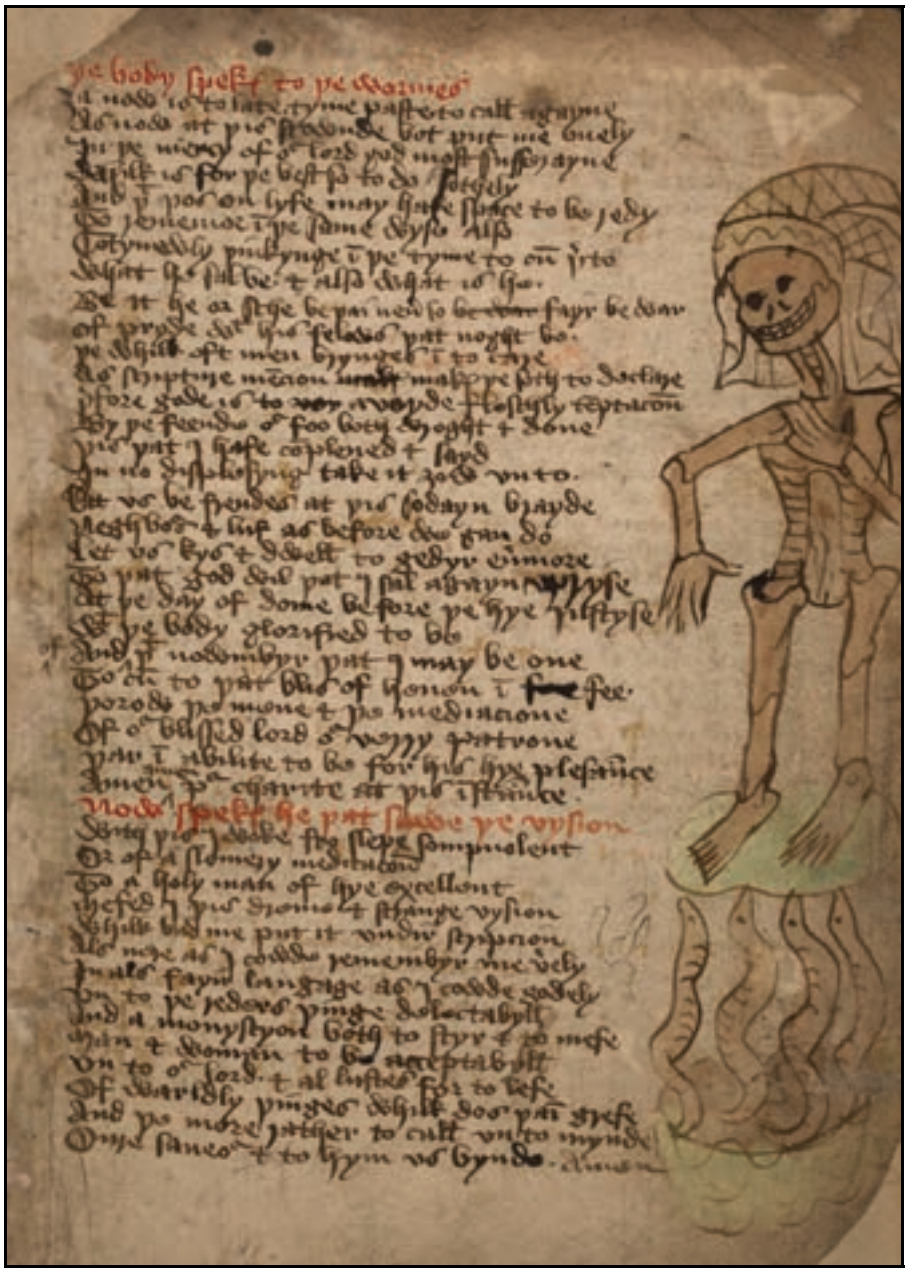

Plate 3. *The Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms*, first half of fifteenth century. British Library, MS Additional 37049, fol. 35^{r}.

Plate 4. *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, London area, *c.* 1308. Psalter of Robert de Lisle, British Library, MS Arundel 83 II, fol. 127[r].

Plate 5. *Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead* (detail, the dead), fourteenth century, mural. Raunds, Northamptonshire.

Plate 6. *Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead* (detail, the living), fourteenth century, mural. Raunds, Northamptonshire.

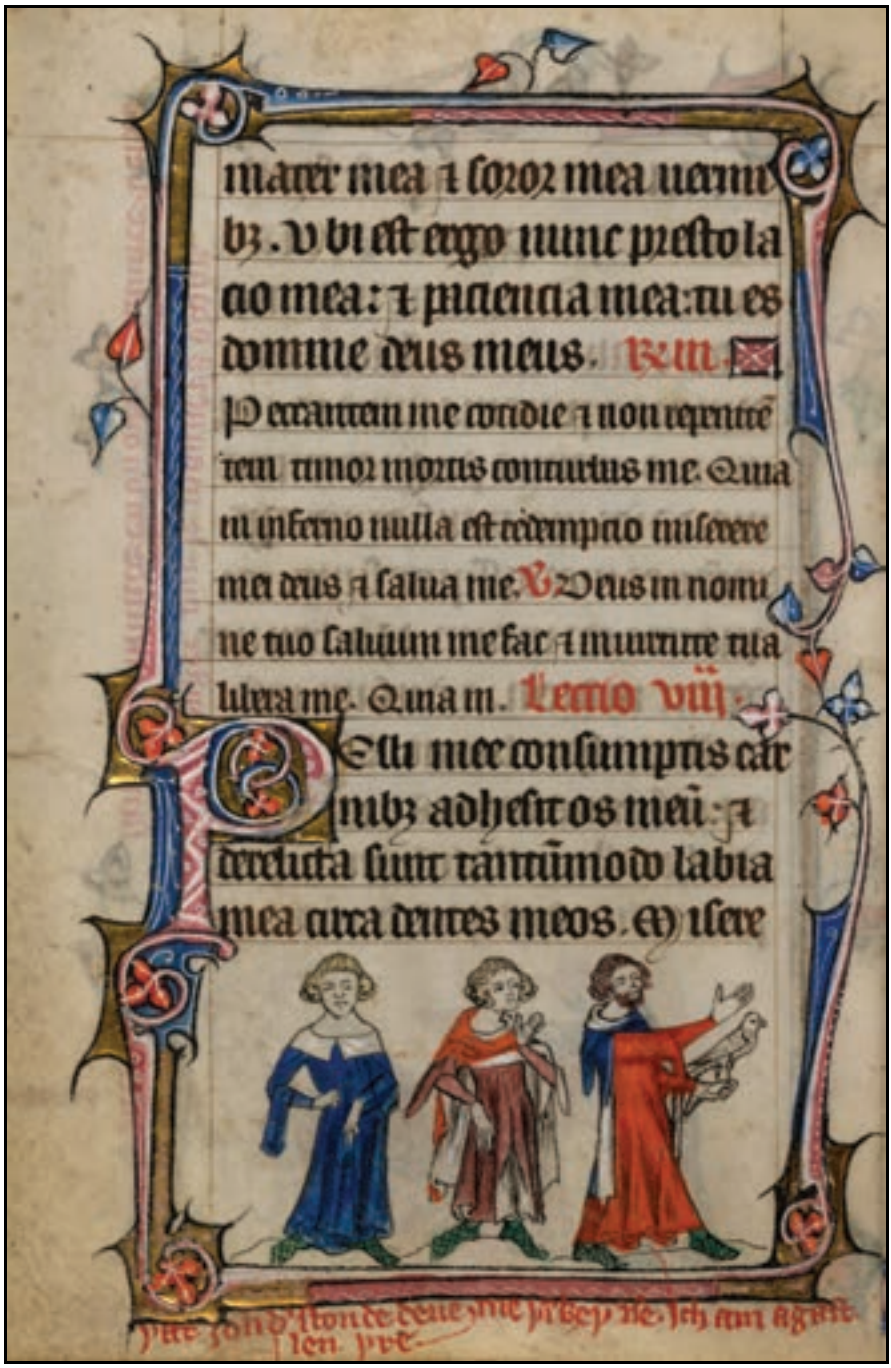

Plate 7. *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* (detail, the living), early fourteenth century. Taymouth Hours, British Library, MS Yates Thompson 13, fol. 179^{v}.

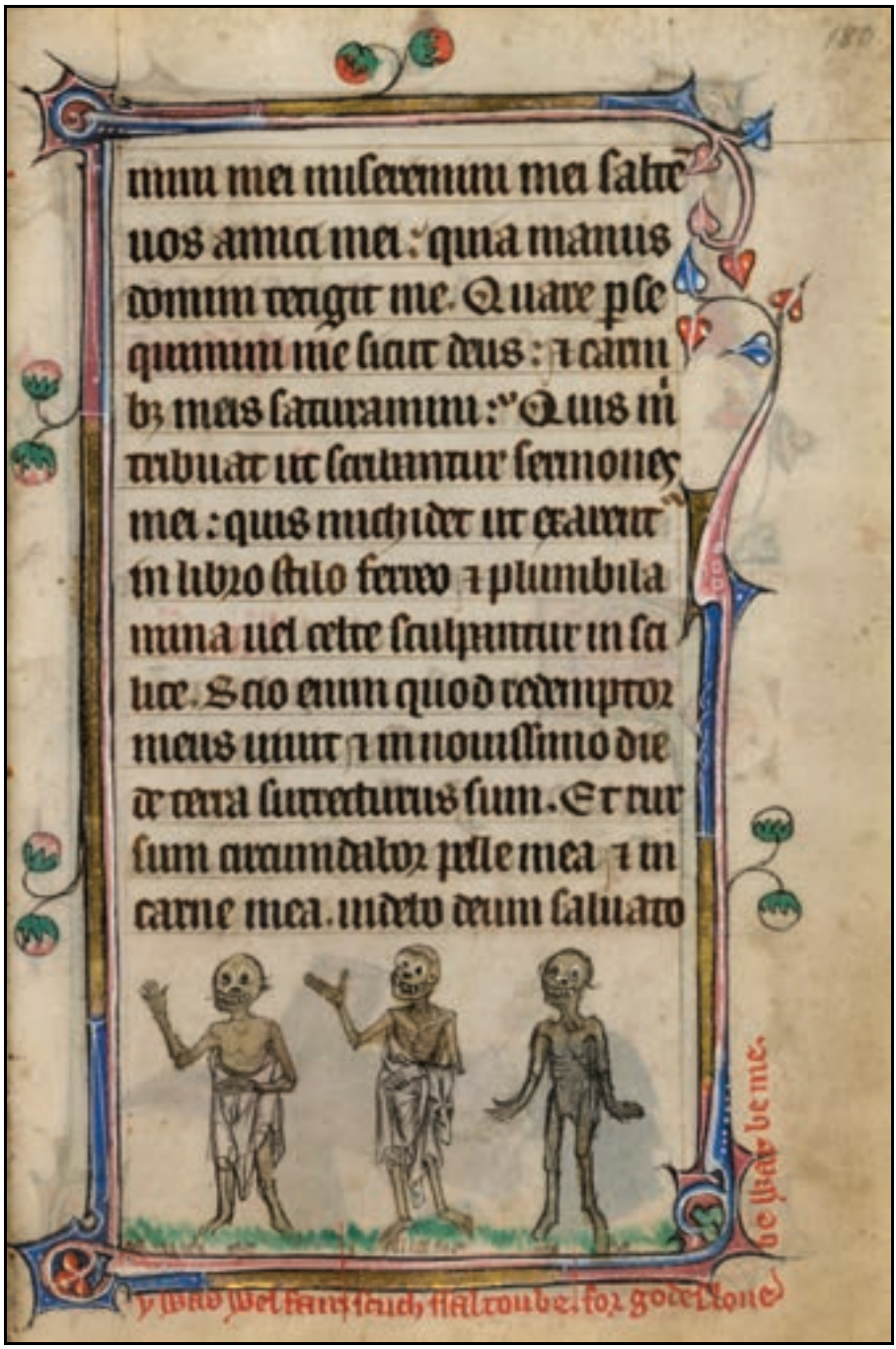

Plate 8. *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* (detail, the dead), early fourteenth century. Taymouth Hours, British Library, MS Yates Thompson 13, fol. 180^{r}.

Plate 9. Jean and Bourgot Le Noir, *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, 1349. Psalter of Bonne of Luxembourg, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, MS Cloisters Inv. 69.86, fol. 322^{r}.

Plate 10. Deathbed scene, with *vado mori*, fifteenth century. British Library, MS Cotton Faustina B. vi. II, fols 1^{v}–2^{r}.

Plate 11. Crowned figure of Death, French, mid-fifteenth century. British Library, MS Egerton 1070, fol. 53^{r}.

Nam sicut candela quando extinguitur lumen non minstrat assistentibus, set certe quod homines solet confortare fetet pessime, revera sic est de homine cum moritur, quia corpus quod vivendo diversos confortabat post mortem illis cedet in horrorem.

(For as a candle, when extinguished, no longer gives light, but rather, having once comforted men, begins to stink; so it is with a man when he dies, for his body which gave comfort to many while it was alive, now induces horror in the same people after death.)

—*Fasciculus morum*

But theras ys the sight of corses and wepyng, that makyth a man to thenke on his deth, that ys the chefe helpe to put away synne and the worldys vanyte.

—John Mirk, *Festial*

Dead, dead? A tomb
Must cover thy sweet eyes.
These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks
Are gone, gone.

—Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Chapter 1

Vile Bodies: The Cultural Life of the Corpse

In Part III of his prose *contemptus mundi* tract *De miseria condicionis humanae* of 1195, entitled, mouthwateringly, *De putredine cadaverum* (On the rot of corpses), Lotario dei Conti di Segni (who would later become Pope Innocent III) rhetorically exhorts his audience, 'Quid ergo fetidius humano cadavere? Quid horribilius homine mortuo?' (What is more foul-smelling than a corpse? What more horrible than a dead man?).[1] This question, repeated ceaselessly in the sermon and spiritual health literature of the Middle Ages both in Latin and in the vernacular (in England, with widespread preaching compendia such as John of Bromyard's *Summa praedicantium*, the *Fasciculus morum*, and Middle English spiritual health guides such as redactions of the *Somme le roi* as *The Prick of Conscience*), finds at length a wordlessly rhetorical answer in the iconography of the macabre: the art of representing the decaying dead. Pictorially it is easier to convey the physical misery of the corpse than that of the living body, but, in their homiletic, rhetorical uses, the bodies of the living were no less the object of opprobrium, and these texts are illustrative of a didactic register of detestation of the body in life *and* death which finds bathetic affinities between a man's living body and its moribund double: 'Vivus, gignit pediculos et lumbricos; mortuus, generabit vermes et muscas' (Alive, he brings forth lice and tapeworms; dead he begets worms and flies).[2] Michael Camille hits the mark when he observes: 'Innocent III describes the inevitable consequences of death for the flesh with the

[1] Lotario dei Segni (Pope Innocent III), *De miseria condicionis humane*, ed. and trans. by Robert E. Lewis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), pp. 206–07.

[2] Lotario dei Segni, *De miseria*, p. 205.

relish of a gourmand describing tasty delicacies, except that those eating are of course worms, and it is we who are the menu.'[3]

Lotario dei Segni's admonition abridges Bernard of Cluny's enthusiastic cataloguing (in his metrical *De contemptu mundi*, written in the first half of the twelfth century) of the involuntary bodily functions of the living as denotative of the involuntary mendacity of fallen man, as cited in the fourteenth-century *Fasciculus morum*'s discourse on pride:

> Si ergo consideres o homo, quid per os, quid per nares, quid per ceteros meatus corporis egreditur, numquid vilius sterquilinio invenies te?
>
> (For if you consider O Man, what comes out of your mouth, your nose, and the other passages of your body, will you not find that you are worse than a dungheap?)[4]

Culturally then, the macabre cadaver is born in the perorations of penitential discourse, before the mass mortalities of the Black Death might (as it has been argued in the past) familiarize the living with the appearance of the dead more intimately. If the offensiveness of living body and decaying corpse can merge almost indistinguishably in penitential discourse, then the art of the macabre shows us too that our dead double, seemingly physically distinct, and imaginatively distant, is in just the same way an extension of the poverty of man's physical life. If this macabre artistic idiom is a selective response to the comprehensive pessimisms of works like Lotario dei Segni's prose, and Bernard of Cluny's influential verse *Contemptus mundi* of the twelfth century, then it is no less effective for that. These treatises, drawn (as with all sermonistic literature) from a tissue of scriptural and patristic quotation and allusion, anticipate and furnish material for the thirteenth-century explosion of preaching, which pursues and reiterates memorable verbal and imaginative formulae. Thus are the themes of death and human putrefaction repeatedly transmitted. These ideas should be taken out of their original contexts only with caution however. They are conceived as part of a programme of spiritual instruction where every vice had its remedy, but one nonetheless, where none was more effective than the thought of unexpected death. After death, in the later Middle Ages, sins were expunged only with the greatest of difficulty by the sinner in Purgatory (or never, in Hell). It therefore

[3] Michael Camille, *Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remiet, Illuminator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 171.

[4] *Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. and trans. by Siegfried Wenzel (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), pp. 94–95; all citations of the *Fasciculus morum* are from this edition and are hereafter cited in the text by page number.

behoved every Christian to make themselves as sinless (and therefore ready for death) as possible by regular confession, penance, and spiritual continence. The obvious implication of this is that continual preparedness for death — a persistent state of moral 'nil by mouth' — had the beneficial effect of making one a rather good Christian also. As every sermonist and spiritual guide would repeat, with scriptural authority: 'Memorare novissima tua, et in eternum non peccabis' — remember your end and you'll never sin (Ecclesiasticus 7. 40).

In the Middle Ages, death was to be kept in mind, not only by imagining your own death, but by remembering those who had died already. The memory of death — both one's own, and everyone else's — is, in art, readily sharpened by the macabre corpse, which becomes a novel means of configuring an arresting and disturbing appearance for one's (future) self, and also for the already deceased — a dead Everyman. This alternation, and by turns fusion, of subject and object in the image of the macabre body — is it one's self; is it everyone else — is a persistent aspect of vernacular expressions of mortality.

Hortatory reminders of the inevitability of death, emphasized by its inescapable, natural physical attributes, were not, of course the only ways of imagining one's death and its consequences. In the Middle Ages, Christians were part of a community of the dead, and this relationship was regulated not simply by language, but by the liturgy and by prayer. Wealthier readers could, privately, in the use of Books of Hours, both pray for the dead and imagine what it is like to be dead in reading the Office of the Dead. The office, comprised of readings, prayers, and psalms — all the liturgical texts appropriate to recitation over the corpse, short of the actual requiem and burial rite — demonstrates the ways in which the dead can be imagined to speak in a regulated mode for the benefit of the living. The penitential psalms, based on the prostration of the lyrical speaker before God, appeared in the office in implied imaginative contexts as the voices of the dead or dying; configured (or rather, glossed, as they often were) as the pleading souls of Purgatory, or the voices of the dead from the grave awaiting resurrection.[5] In reading the office, however, the implied emotional responses are quite different to those stimulated by the sermon rhetoric of decay. Where the penitential rhetoric of the body is designed to increase loathing of the dead as a means to increase loathing of ourselves, the Office of the Dead, even in using some of the same language in quoting from the Book of Job, prompts compassion for the dead. Nonetheless, the suite of visual themes used in the art of the medieval

[5] Roger S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York: Braziller, 1997), pp. 117–18.

Office of the Dead would often include a macabre cadaver, in a variety of modes and representations. The *transi* could by turns be adopted as the active allegorical figure of death, or the naturalistic representation of every-corpse, in vignettes from the *Danse Macabre*, or *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*. The cumulative effect of the use of this artistic idiom, where used, is the objectification and isolation of the corpse — making the dead horrifying again, even in the office, whose programme of lyrical reading urges us to condole with them. Here too the use of the themes of the macabre represents a deliberate and studied intensification of horror in implied attitudes to the dead. The other visual tropes used in the Office of the Dead could elide this brusqueness, and would include more muted or oblique evocations of mortality, such as the shrouded, and therefore unseen, corpse awaiting burial: Job in the dungheap, and Lazarus raised by Christ (a figure, which, though always appearing in iconography as a recently dead corpse, progressively 'decays' in some iconographic witnesses in the fifteenth century, such as a panel painting made by Nicolas Froment in 1461, and now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence).

So far we have been tracing the outlines of a single idea — the language of physical detestation of the body — as a means to discern a cultural stimulus for interpreting the dead as figures to be imaginatively and systematically abominated — where 'meditation on the vanity of earthly life, the *contemptus mundi* [...] gives rise to images [...] adopted by the great poets of the macabre'.[6] If, then, to clothe the body in its macabre outlines is a way of formalizing anxieties and attitudes of fear and loathing of the corpse, and of the dead, collectively, we have not dealt yet with a different way of imagining and rejecting the dead which must play as important a rhetorical and narrative role — not the 'rational' language of bodily execration, but the 'irrational' modes of human superstition. Any sense of medieval superstition is of course notoriously hard to gauge, as an extraliterary, and therefore scantily preserved cultural experience. Superstitious horror of the dead must be particularly hard to assess, given that the culture of death in the Middle Ages is intimately bound up with the languages (at times contradictory and inconsistent) of religious orthodoxy. What we are left with in trying to discern what is potentially a very powerful idea — popular fear of the moribund corpse and of the terrifying dead, unregulated by doctrinal formulae — can be dependent on cultural analogy and generalization, rather than literary evidence. Nonetheless, tantalizing glimpses into popular mentalities are left to us by official discourse.

[6] Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, p. 111.

What I will discuss here is an aversion to the corpse which is arguably more disturbing in its implications because it is a fear generated by emotional, primitive responses to the dead. Such superstition sees the dead as *un*dead: unstable, disruptive, harmful.

Loathing of the dead stems quite naturally from physiological aversion to the decaying human corpse, a register which we have just traced in sermonistic language. In the material and social sense, practical management of the corpse requires containing the physical risk of contamination from the decomposing remains of the deceased — all 'rational' rituals, irrespective of the ways in which the dead may be addressed or lent agency in the very exercise of them. It is this awareness of physical unpleasantness which the penitential rhetoric against the body, as we have seen above, quite logically systematizes, in order to curb human pride. This is a matter of common sense; what is less so is something which might be glibly described as the 'boo!' factor: supernatural fear of the dead, or necrophobia. For the dead to be imbued imaginatively with sentience is a cultural response without date and appears to be an intrinsic aspect of ritualizing and commemorating the dead since prehistoric times. Non-Christian, pre-Christian, and unofficial Christian rituals have always (if not uniformly) included grave goods in the burying of the dead, for the use of the deceased, and for the maintenance of the deceased's social status in the afterlife (as well as an expression of the status of those who mourn them). Formalized ancestor worship too has been, and is, common, in non-Christian societies — implying a believed sentience, usually benign, in the deceased. Such sentience always implied too that the dead had to be propitiated and were capable of malice if not lent proper funereal and commemorative rites. Fearing the responses of the dead is an intrinsic part of unofficial attitudes to the dead in medieval and post-medieval Europe, and this fear can be ascribed to a host of anxieties: fear of the causes of their sentience — often believed to arise from the manner of death (good or bad — suicide was particularly abominated), or spiritual possession. Fear of their appearance, fear of their desire to remain in the world of the living, fear of their destination in death, and of their propensity to return to molest the living; fear, ultimately of their being transformed into something unknowable, unpredictable, alien, and — in a mode which belies their recumbence and silence — sentient: such anxiety stems ultimately from some not easily defined complication of the natural human difficulty of imagining the experience of death for the deceased, and of adequately severing social ties with them. Naturally, the hardest thing for the bereaved to imagine is that the deceased has simply ceased to think and experience anything: if it looks human, it must be aware. As Vanessa Harding remarks:

> The ways in which people treated the bodies of their close relatives, friends or neighbours reflected a strong sense of both the individuality and the social persona of the deceased, and this identification muted or delayed other feelings about the corpse — superstition, fear, anxiety. A body without those individualising and personalising associations, however, was viewed more starkly as a source of danger — moral or environmental — or at least trouble and expense. At the same time, every body is viewed from a number of different standpoints: almost every corpse is a personalised body for someone. [...] [I]t is the balance between the two that is crucial.[7]

Until the recognizable face of the deceased had dissolved away into skeletal anonymity, the dead still retained the attributes of the living, and, in popular apprehension, could retain the same sensitivity to what was happening around them as they did in life. The fact that muscular contractions can still occur in the body after death, sometimes caused by the lapse of rigor mortis, or even by the body's expanding and contracting with the gasses of putrefaction, would have contributed to the evocation of a fear of violence from the dead as they seemingly struggled against their own inhumation.[8] To irrationally assume the potential for 'life' in a dead body is a natural reaction to an inert corpse, but it is also an imaginative reflex that is ultimately responsible, arguably, for stimulating all supernatural literature and belief concerning the dead, medieval and modern.

Some medieval texts, such as the early eleventh-century Franconian penitential of Burchard of Worms, indeed make explicit reference (by way of identifying abuses) to social practices which imply the sentience of corpses. Burchard documents the custom of staking the corpses of the unbaptized or unshriven dead to fix them to their burial spot and prevent their vengeful return.[9] Similarly, as Alexander Murray has demonstrated in his prodigious, ongoing three-volume history of medieval suicide, the bodies of the self-slain were liable to extraordinary treatment and (officially) were condemned to burial in unconsecrated grounds. Nancy Caciola observes too how local practices could include the disposal of suicides in rivers so that the self-slain would not find their way back to the living

[7] Vanessa Harding, 'Whose Body? A Study of Attitudes towards the Dead Body in Early Modern Paris', in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 170–87 (pp. 171–72).

[8] On post-mortem muscular spasms, see Cedric Mims, *When We Die: What Becomes of the Body after Death* (London: Robinson, 1998), p. 113.

[9] Burchard of Worms, *Decretum*, IXX. 5 (PL, 140, col. 974; cited in Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 29).

from whom they had so forcibly removed themselves.[10] We need not even look to ecclesiastical records of demotic responses such as these. The subjectivization and punishment of the dead was commonplace in medieval law. *Cruentatio* — the bleeding of the corpse — was held to identify, in judicial contexts, those who had injured them. Of course, fresh corpses beginning to putrefy would always 'bleed' — leak bodily fluids — and it was for this reason that the corpse at burial was always kept outside the church, at the lychgate. By the same token, the public display of dead criminals and traitors was not simply to demonstrate the fact of punishment and warn of the consequences of their crimes, but to imaginatively constitute in itself an ongoing punishment to the 'sensitive' dead. Here, the corporate vengeance of the living against the criminal dead overwhelms any supernatural apprehension of revenancy. Similarly, archaeological finds from Anglo-Saxon Britain have uncovered potentially retributive or simultaneously preventative gestures in burial. Skeletons have been found to have been made to rest face down, either in execration of the deceased (as a humbling gesture), or, as it were, to confuse the corpse should it awake and try to dig its way out of the grave; it would do so now heading in the wrong direction.[11] Such 'crouched' burials are a recurring puzzle in archaeology.[12]

Ultimately, what official Christian practice did to ensure that only the living could properly interfere with the dead (and not the other way around) was to regulate the dead within the precise imaginative topographies provided by the Christian afterlife. Accordingly, the sentience of the dead could be exercised at a safe distance from the living — in Heaven, Hell, and, from the thirteenth century, Purgatory and its precursory limbos. Still, the supernaturally active undead could roam the earth even among Christian communities, according to religious tale collections, histories, and accounts of Christian miracles. It is these tales which by degrees engage with an anomalous conception of the dead — the dead who breach the Christian decorum of the separateness of the living and deceased — but who, at least, can still be pressed into doctrinal service through their testimony, where given. Nonetheless many accounts exist where a moral interpretation is simply not offered. This is an anomaly to which we will address

[10] Caciola, 'Wraiths', pp. 29–30.

[11] Christopher Daniell and Victoria Thompson, 'Pagans and Christians, 400–1150', in *Death in England: An Illustrated History*, ed. by Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 65–89 (p. 68).

[12] See the essays in *Deviant Burial and the Archaeological Record*, ed. by Eileen Murphy, which explore this phenomenon across time.

ourselves in attempting to discern a cultural context amid which the macabre idiom can provide an imaginative device to regulate the physical appearance and identity of the dead.

If, above, we have outlined an oversimplified view of clerical discourse confining itself to biological registers of bodily repudiation, then we must recognize how clerical writing too can itself identify unofficial beliefs concerning the lives of the dead. Sermon tales were keen to exploit an innate, generalized fear of the corpse suddenly coming to life. The Carthusian order's founding legend (illustrated in, or preceding, the Office of the Dead, in the lavish *Belles heures* and *Très riches heures* of Jean, Duc de Berry, in the fifteenth century — an unmatched iconographic interest in the legend by a wealthy patron) relates how St Bruno was motivated to found the order after attending the funeral of a canon of Notre-Dame — Raymond Diocrès — whose corpse, amid its funereal rites, spoke three times of the torture he was suffering in Hell, having been judged.[13] Even Bernard of Cluny's *De contemptu mundi* alludes to the popular fear of the return of the dead in his Olympian catalogue of the wrongs of the body. Yes, he says, the flesh of the dead is dreadful, but

> Non tibi funere sive cadavere de pecuali;
> Vel metus ingruit aut febris irruit, ex sociali.
> Caesus iter secus, inde vir, hinc pecus efflat uterque;
> Ejus an istius est timor amplius? Ejus, aperte.
> Non tibi fit metus exanimum pecus aequore prati:
> Amplius effera sunt tibi funeral fratis humati.
> Ossa revisere vel prope pergere nocte timebis,
> Cum minime secus exanimum pecus ire pavebis.
> Nostra cadavera nostraque funera foetidiora,
> Esse relinquitur esseque noscitur, horridiora.

(From the death or the carcass of cattle you have no fear, but from a companion's either fear assails you or fever attacks you. A man is slain beside the road on that side, a beast on this side, and both expire. Is there greater dread of the man or beast? The man, clearly. You have no fear of a lifeless beast on a stretch of meadow; the rites of a buried brother are more frightful to you. You will fear to see his bones again at night or to come near

[13] See the accounts of the legend of Dicorès and of its illustration in the two Hours of Jean, Duc de Berry, in Timothy B. Husband, *The Art of Illumination: The Limbourg Brothers and the 'Belles heures' of Jean de France, Duc de Berry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 154–56; see also Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 214.

> them, although you will not be afraid to walk by a lifeless beast. It is granted that our corpses are more disgusting, it is known that our burials are more frightening.)[14]

The Latin text of the *Fasciculus morum* (interweaving vernacular lyrics in a Menippean mode) amid its discussion on pride, cites the physical condition of the dead to be the vice's ultimate cure, and buttresses this rhetoric with suspicions of preternatural unrest in the corpse:

> Cum homo, inquit, moritur, nasus frigescit, facies pallescit, nervi ac vene rumpuntur, cor in duas partes dividitur. Nichil est horribilius cadaver illius: in domo non dimittitur ne familia moriatur, in aqua non proicitur ne inficiatur, in aere non suspenditur ne ille corrumpatur; set tamquam venenum pestiferum in fovea proicitur ne amplius appareat, terra circumdatur ne fetor ascendat, firmissime calcatur ne iterum assurgat, set ut terra in terram maneat et amplius visus hominis illud non aspiciat. *Unde Anglice dictutur* (Whence it is said in English): Was ther never caren so lothe | as mon when he to put goth | And deth has layde so lowe. | For when deth drawe mon from othur, the suster nul not se the brother, ne fader the sone iknawe.
>
> (When a man dies, his nose grows cold, his face turns white, his nerves and veins break, his heart splits in two. Nothing is more horrible than his corpse: it is not left in the house lest the family should die; it is not thrown into water lest it should cause infection; it is not hung up in the air lest it should corrupt it; but like pestilential poison it is thrown into a pit so that it may no longer be seen; it is surrounded with earth so that its stench cannot rise; it is firmly stamped down so that it may not rise again, but rather that earth may remain in earth and man's eyes may not behold it. Whence it is said in English: [...]) (pp. 98–99)

Implied, and almost missed, in this catalogue of banal horrors is the latent energy of the corpse: his enforced burial is as much to *restrain* as to discard him. In 'attested' cases of revenancy, the intrinsic responses of the living to the dead can be emphasized, as in Gervase of Tilbury's extensive account of the Ghost of Beaucaire in his *Otia imperialia* — the probable model for the later, hugely popular vision of the purgatorial dead, *Spiritus Guidonis* — where a young girl sees the ghost of her adolescent cousin killed in a brawl:

> Post tres aut quinque dies, de nocte lucente lucerna uigilanti puelle, quam admodum in uita dilixerat, apparuit; a qua salutatur et non sine timore, tum propter facilis etatis pusilanimitatem, tum propter id quod naturaliter mortalibus cordibus insitum est, *ut mortuous abhorreant et cum trepidatione mentis expectant*.

[14] Bernard of Cluny, *De contemptu mundi*, ed. and trans. by Ronald E. Pepin (East Lansing: Colleagues, 1991), I. 845–54.

> (He appeared at night to the young girl, who had been very dear to him when he was alive, as she prayed in the lamplight. She greeted him, but fearfully — not just because she was naturally shy, *but because it is natural for the living to have a heartfelt fear of the dead*).[15]

Thus, the dead were feared even as, rhetorically, they were to be adduced to the imagination. The power of the macabre idiom rests, as we have said, in shockingly making the dead — always to be feared — even more obscene and horrifying in their physical representation, to graft upon them the physical reflexes of horror induced by the witnessing of decay upon the deceased; to combine the physiological with the psychological reflexes of anxiety. What is important for our discussion is how imagination of the dead, in its manifold ways, disturbs, however much this experience is articulated; whether as a supernatural encounter with macabre revenant, or banal physical encounter with inert remains. For one model of how direct experience of the dead can induce emotional distress, one might turn to a modern archaeologist who cites 'the morbid nature of the archaeological material' in excavating and opening nineteenth-century lead coffins containing well-preserved corpses, contributing to low staff morale and resignations during the clearance of the crypt of Christ Church Spitalfields in 1994.[16] The horrors of tombs and their contents are more than proverbial, or even a cliché of gothic sensibility; across time, they are founded on our deepest emotional anxieties and our most basic physical intolerances.

Burial, Belief, and Response

John Mirk, a Shropshire prior, writing in the 1380s, greets the audience of his funeral-day sermon from his *Festial* (an English sermon collection for parish priests' use throughout the liturgical year) with the prospect of their future selves: 'Goode men, as ye alle se, here is a myrroure to us alle: a corse browth to the chyrch.'[17] Not only is the dead Christian brought to church in a final act of

[15] Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*, ed. and trans. by S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), III. 103; *Medieval Ghost Stories*, ed. and trans. by Joynes, p. 79 (emphasis mine).

[16] 'Archaeological Perceptions of the Recent Dead', in *The Loved Body's Corruption: Archaeological Contributions to the Study of Mortality*, ed. by Jane Downes and Tony Pollard, Scottish Archaeological Forum (Glasgow: Cruithne, 1999), p. 190.

[17] *Mirk's Festial*, ed. by Theodor Erbe, EETS, e.s., 96 (London: Kegan Paul, 1905), pp. 294–97; subsequent citations of this text are from this edition and are cited by page number in the text. Account of the texts in Thomas D. Cooke, 'Tales', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English,*

prostration before God, but also for the purposes of disposal; to remove him from the living, to safeguard them from the carrion he has become:

> [M]ankynde was makyd of slem of the erth, that is, of kynde stynkyng in himself; therfore mannus flesse, be hit neure so fayre no swete whyl it is on lyue, anone as it is dede, hit begynnuth to stynke and turne to foulest careyn that is, and sonnest a man schall takon hys deth of the sauur therof. Wherefore hyt is broght to the chyrch, to ben hud in the erth that is halowod; for vche cors is vrth, and comyth of the erth, and lyuuth be the erth, and at the laste, beried in the erthe. (p. 294)

The parochial paraphrase of Bernardine rhetoric, still part of the liturgy of burial (ashes to ashes), elaborates on the 'earth unto earth' trope from Genesis, an idea repeatedly lent gnomic, riddling utterance in English lyrics on the 'Erthe upon Erthe' theme from the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century — often used as epitaphs, as well as anthologized. This tradition was a uniquely English vernacularization of morbid, scriptural truths, one of astonishing longevity. The earliest, and shortest, of these, from the anthology BL, MS Harley 2253, offers an insistent play on the semantic properties of 'erthe': Man, world, wealth, corpse, soil.[18]

Erthe toc of erteh erte with woh;	(Earth took of earth earth with woe)
Erhte other erthe to the erthe droh;	(Earth other earth to the earth drew)
Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh;	(Earth laid earth in earthen bonds)
Tho heved erthe of erthe inoh.	(Then had earth of earth enough)

Translation is not enough; we might imaginatively decode this lyric as follows:

> Earth (man) took flesh (earth) with pain (of birth)
> Earth (man) married and begot earth (flesh)
> Earth (man) buried Earth (man)
> Until Earth (soil) had enough of Earth (man) and cast him up at judgement *or*
> Earth (man) had had enough of Earth (world) and died.

Yet, in contrast to the imaginative games of the more laconic 'Erthe poems' (or even the pitiless evocation of the loathsome dead witnessed above in *Fasciculus morum*), Mirk's account eschews any verbal art for simple facts, as he summarizes with tact the consolatory ritual of medieval parish burial:

1050–1500, ed. by J. B. Severs, A. E. Hartung, and P. Beidler, 11 vols to date (New Haven: Archon, 1957–2005) (hereafter *Manual*), IX (1993), 3273–77.

[18] For a study and edition of Middle English poems on this theme, see *The Middle English Poem 'Erthe upon Erthe'*, ed. by Hilda M. R. Murray, EETS, o.s., 141 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1911; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

> Than hath he a white schete on him, schewing that he was clene schryvon, and clansud of hys synnus be contricion of herte and be asoyling of holy chyrch. Than is hys hed leyde into the west and hys fette into the est, to ben the more redy to sene Criste that comyth oute of the est to the dome, and so ryson ageynus hym. (p. 294)

At last, poignantly, 'is the erth caste on hym, and so the dor tyneth on hym for euermore' (p. 295). It is obvious, then, that the ritual and response of inhumation is inflected not only by its constituting a biological necessity, but also by its nature as an emotional impulse which seeks to remove the dead from immediate experience and see them securely interred. The medieval social practices that accompanied this could, of course, vary widely over geography, time, class, and belief in medieval Europe, and cannot be extensively examined here. There are even climatic implications in how societies regulate their dead. Scandinavian societies, where bodies of the dead were liable to last longer because of the cold, were marked with practices involving a more prolonged experience of observing the dead body, one not possible in more southerly regions, where corpses have to be dispatched with some urgency before they putrefy under the sun. The seemingly nonchalant living dead that populate medieval Icelandic saga literature may reflect this durability and imaginative unpredictability of the corpse in the northern world, where burial can be impossible in winter in the frozen earth (often mandating cremation).[19] Ariès has observed that macabre motifs in medieval art coincide 'almost perfectly' in north-western Europe, where practice dictated the corpse's face be covered, owing to longer periods of awaiting burial. Italy, Spain, and southern France, disposing of their dead more promptly, leave their faces uncovered for the living.[20] His 'almost perfectly' is less than satisfactory an equivocation, however, given the by no means infrequent appearance of the *transi* in several fourteenth- and fifteenth-century frescos (usually on the Triumph of Death theme; see below, Chapter 6) in Italy, and often as an allegorical representation of death itself. Yet the needs of the dead in both environments for the confinement of burial are exigent; whether on the one hand to prevent a fantasized vampiric reanimation of the deceased, or on the other hand to ward

[19] For a convenient discussion of Northern burial practice, see Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 312–16, or Hilda Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Norse Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), chaps 1 and 2. For an excellent discussion of folklore, history, and archaeology in reading the undesirable dead, see John Blair, 'The Dangerous Dead in Early Medieval England', in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. by Stephen Baxter and others (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 539–60.

[20] Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, p. 114.

against the virtual time-bomb of rapid putrefaction for the corpse in the hotter south. In neither environment, obviously, is the sight of the decaying dead desirable, and consequently the sight of the macabre cadaver, formalized in art, must be adjudged to appal equally.

What is significant for us in how these cultural perceptions can be altered or substantiated by the appearance of the idea of the macabre is to consider how the principle of burial as insulation of the living from the dead is utterly undermined by one aspect of macabre art in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The *transi* tomb or cadaver tomb, appearing from the very late fourteenth century in France, and present (in a variety of forms) in Western Europe for the next two centuries, is a tomb with flagrant exhumation encoded in its semiotic of represented interment. It does not dominate, statistically or artistically, late medieval and Renaissance tomb sculpture, yet its rhetorical and emotional effect is far weightier than its incidence (somewhat under three hundred examples are believed extant from the period to 1600 in England — about a hundred including simpler brass effigies — France, and the empire).[21] Quite simply, it is a tomb with a representation (sculpted, often in relief, in stone or brass) of the decomposing body. This imaginative breach of social decorum is artistically satisfying and didactically rich in its implications. Despite everything we have said above about the cultural propensities to exclude the dead from experience and imagination, decomposition of the corpse, however distasteful a concept to imagine or depict, must have exerted a fascination over (at least some) medieval people. Here, the *transi* tomb satisfies this inarticulable urge; it gives the onlooker a window into the grave — a bizarre and imaginative obliteration of the very purpose of the tomb. As Michael Camille has observed, such tombs were 'an effort to make the earth transparent and to reveal what goes on in the ground — to make the fact of death a continuing spectacle to the living'.[22] As an ostentatious emblem of decay, the decaying

[21] Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 142. See also Kathleen Cohen's 'List and Categories of Transi Tombs', in Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 189–96, which can potentially distort a statistical assessment of the macabre cadaver, as she includes all recumbent effigies, portrayed as rotting or not. This book, as has been noted by Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, and Sophie Oosterwijk, 'Food for Thought — Food for Worms: The Appearance and Interpretation of the "Verminous" Cadaver in Britain and Europe', *Church Monuments*, 20 (2005), 40–80, 133–40, omits several cadaver effigies from the east of Ireland (the English Pale of Settlement). For these, see H. M. Roe, 'Cadaver Effigial Monuments in Ireland', *JRSAI*, 99 (1969), 1–19, and Oosterwijk, 'Food for Thought'.

[22] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 175.

body becomes in the context of medieval mortuary sculpture (for pious gentry or royalty), a gesture of humility which concretizes the verbal admonishments of sermons on *contemptus mundi* themes. Here, more than anywhere else, the macabre shows itself foremost to be an imaginative epiphany in the culture of contempt for the world and the flesh, which exemplifies moral decay through the explicit monstrance of physical decay. More than even pictures of the three dead or the *Danse Macabre* — subjects that are distanced from experience by their enclosing narrative fictions — to see this stylized corpse appropriated as the lasting portrait of actual dead people would have (or at a minimum could have, for many) shocked onlookers, but instructively and productively. Such tombs become a final act of mortification on the part of the deceased, and a parting gift to the living, who can learn lessons of mortality by meditating on them. This is a process modelled in *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms*, one of the most idiosyncratic iterations of the macabre idiom, which bears significant implications for a particular fifteenth-century English religious manuscript — Add. 37049 of the British Library — which, in addition to frequent illustrations of cadavers, included two formalized representations of double-decker *transi* tombs. This is a book to which we will address ourselves later in Chapter 4. But we can begin to see for now, how macabre art, in the wider traditions of imagining the dead, attempts to resolve a lacuna in human experience. Macabre art helps us, in seeing the bodies of others, to see ourselves in death, in a fashion we would never want to see, offering a moral mirror for everyone of their appearance after death and offering a summation of the longstanding catalogues of physical horrors that the *contemptus mundi* had achieved, of finding encoded within the dead body the emblazoning of the consequences of the Fall. It recognizes in the dead body not only the natural destination of the flesh, but also, as Joseph Leo Koerner observes, 'an ostentatious message that God directs at the living to inspire terror in them'.[23] The art of the macabre, whether in the context of the cadaver tombs or mural friezes, arrests the physical process of decay at its most unwholesome (and fleeting) stage for perpetual study by the onlooker, to derive the ultimate admonition, admixed with the pyrrhic consolation of knowing that just as life is fleeting, so is decay itself. Corruption, as transitory as life itself, is emblematic of the temporal life of man. The macabre cadaver of pictorial art and tomb sculpture is frozen in time, so that it will never become a clean object, free of rot — instead

[23] Joseph Leo Koerner, 'The Mortification of the Image: Death as Hermeneutic in Hans Baldung Grien', *Representations*, 10 (1985), 52–101 (p. 53).

remaining, as pithily expressed by Johan Huizinga, 'a more concrete embodiment of the perishable'.[24]

If, in the language of *contemptus mundi*, the uselessness of the dead body is a recurrent refrain, it belies the obvious irony that dead bodies can indeed be pressed into useful service as moralizing props, whether ostentatiously as in cadaver tombs, or even proverbially, in the performance of medieval sermons, wherein a preacher could have (as Shakespeare's Hamlet does) used the skull as *memento mori* (a monitory reflex given lyric formulation in John Skelton's 'Upon a Dead Man's Head'; see below, Chapter 6). The skull is of course a sterile object free of active corruption; nonetheless poetic versions of the gesture of the preacher's exhorting his audience to look productively on the death's head in his hand (as described by Gerald Owst in John of Bromyard's *Summa predicantium*) see the processes of decay imaginatively reiterated, in Robert Henryson's fifteenth-century lyric on this motif (below, Chapter 6).[25] Where medieval people would have, in reality, had access to the putrescent bodies of the dead, it would not have been a long-lasting display — the exposed bodies of criminals and traitors would not have endured for long under the depredations of scavengers, and psychologically, would have induced such recoil and familiarity as to make them more easily ignored — more, at any rate than their sculpted counterparts which arrest by their craft and audacity of theme: the presentation of a corpse *designed* for prolonged study. Saints' bodies were, it is true, if not concealed (often fragmentarily) in their reliquaries, then exposed for permanent instruction. Here, however, the accompanying message would have focused on the inherent semantic richness of relics — the remaining traces of a saint, now apotheosized in Paradise — a token of paradisiacal achievement by humans. For mortal Everyman, who can never aspire to saintliness, the monumentalization of the corrupt body is testament only to moral corruption, and to the consequences of the Fall, which engendered death.

Transi effigies could, of course, exist as surrogates for the actual noble corpse which may have been so embalmed as to exclude the possibility of corruption. Thus, their bodies would never fully mirror their cadaver effigies in these instances, having left instead an outward, virtual idealization of the process of decay which they would have circumvented in the funeral rites of embalmment or even (for higher-ranking nobility) dismemberment and multiple burial after death — a

[24] Quoted in Koerner, 'The Mortification of the Image', p. 53.

[25] G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. 344.

process which, though the subject of official church detestation, would be *de rigeur* for the very wealthy, and which had long been witnessed in the medieval economy of saints' relics.[26]

These practices were often dictated by necessity, attributable to the desirability of not transporting volatile flesh over the large distances sometimes required (after the Battle of Agincourt, for instance, the bones of the Earl of Oxford and the Duke of York were returned to England while their flesh was interred in France where they fell). Yet spiritual and commemorative concerns obtained also. Some magnates preferred to spread themselves over their far-flung domains, or to be close to the relics of a preferred saint, or those of their ancestors. What emerges here also in the aristocratic desire for types of burial is a sense of how bodily remains could be imbued with the same potential as that of saints, to retain some attribute of self and *virtus*, after death. If we have seen how fear of the dead can be a *datum*, it may well have been a desired effect of Edward I's (unfulfilled) wish for his no doubt fearsome-looking skeleton to be borne in perpetuity in battle against the Scots after his flesh was boiled and buried, and perhaps even Edward IV's (again unfulfilled) request to be memorialized in a double *transi* tomb.

Thus, though medieval people would (after St Paul) know that death would ultimately be swallowed up in Christ's victory, and that (after Corinthians 15. 50), the corruptible body would ultimately put on incorruption, the macabre monstrance of the dead body, in pigment or plastic, both as destiny of the living and as the figuration of the allegory of death itself, is a firm reminder that mortal man must indeed for a while succumb to death and corruption. No two of these portrayals were exactly alike, and some were more realistic than others. As with all medieval art, artists achieved a finished work through adapting a pre-existing model, or perhaps even experience (one assumes fleeting) of an actual cadaver witnessed (perhaps the remains of a body displayed in judicial punishment, or even experience of the consequences of the mass mortalities of recurring plague). Some of the more outstanding cadaver tombs could suggest that artists based their depictions on actual unburied bodies. In the final analysis, decomposition of the body is a difficult image to render mimetically, yet medieval and Renaissance artists negotiate it with something resembling mannerist aplomb. Even without such visual imagery, medieval people would nonetheless have had a broad idea of what happens to the body after death, and if not, were liable to be reminded of it, as we have seen above.

[26] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 176.

Mimesis and the Macabre — Reading Rot

Implicit in the forgoing is that the work of language and iconography is to realize a physical process in a mimetically faithful way. If macabre language and art tends to deal in a particular set of images and verbal formulae, where, in reality, the objective biological progression of decomposition can be difficult to verbalize consistently, then we are still dealing with a set of formulae that can repeatedly impress themselves on an audience and renew themselves depending on individual context and style, and with formulae (or indeed commonplaces) which can substitute themselves for an experience of only so many 'sensual' permutations. Can it, then, be productive to offer an objective description of human decay, as part of gauging the capacities of medieval rhetoric and art? What I offer below is a description, drawn, I stress, not from firsthand experience, but from recent writers on the topic of death who are drawn, in the course of their own discussions, to the root of anxieties of dealing with the dead: the physical and biological. These accounts, from recent books by Cedric Mims, Mary Roach, Paul Barber, and others, all deal with the sociology, archaeology, and folklore of the corpse, and all include a descriptive exercise such as the one I am about to begin (and indeed, at times it has not been possible to refrain from borrowing certain phrases from them wholesale).[27] A verbal account such as this one might seem indecorous, but in a discussion of the capacities of earlier writing and art it remains important to imagine for ourselves a putatively objective 'physical' model for rhetorical and iconographic elaboration.

The process of decomposition is one which merely appears gruesome to human sensibility: decay is of course perfectly natural. Nonetheless, some readers may wish to skip the next few paragraphs, which try to explore the idea of morbidity (psychological and literary) as stemming from a series of responses to the physical consequences of death. Medieval preachers, similarly, knew such an exploration could be disturbing, and used material resembling it with the expressed purpose of distressing an audience to the ends of spiritual improvement. If, in place of spiritual benefit, we derive some kind of imaginative appreciation, then so much the better, even allowing for an unsettled stomach. As Cedric Mims (himself a

[27] This description is drawn from the detailed accounts in Mims, *When We Die*, pp. 119–26; Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 102–17; Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 119–27; Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (London: Viking, 2003), pp. 61–84; and from Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 177.

physician) has remarked, it is in fact fortunate that we are so degradable; if humans had indestructible bodies, the surface of the earth would be covered with the dead.[28] All living things naturally decay and are recycled, something which medieval people knew; yet the human consequences of this would have elicited from them both horror and morbid curiosity, just like us.

The pathological facts are as follows: at death, the heart stops, initiating the process of bodily decay. Body temperature drops to that of its surroundings in *algor mortis*, while the muscles begin to stiffen in rigor mortis at a slower rate, starting from the head and neck and moving downwards, and ultimately lapsing at any time from ten to forty-eight hours after death. Cell renewal ceases, and lyctic enzymes and other chemicals are released from the body's dead tissues, in a fermentative process called 'autolysis' — essentially self-digestion.[29] Once the fermentation process begins, the body, like any organic matter, starts to putrefy, and bacteria and other organisms now assist in the process. Stomach, bladder, or intestinal contents are likely to leave the body, as the muscles retaining them no longer function. The body's content of blood settles and causes a purplish discolouration of the skin where it accumulates, and a paler one indicating where it has left, together with a visible darkening of the surface veins, and soon after, the discharge of bloody fluids from bodily orifices. The danger of discharge of these fluids (occasioning judicial *cruentatio* as we have observed above) meant that bodies were only gradually admitted to church for burial rites in the Middle Ages — any leakage of blood necessitated reconsecration of the church.

Other visible signs of putrefaction on the body at this point are swelling of the face, which after eighteen hours can become unrecognizable. The lips and tongue tend to swell, and the tongue can often protrude from the mouth. The eyeballs dry up, retract into the sockets, and dissolve. These facial effects are realized mimetically in the great fourteenth-century *Triumph of Death* fresco in the Campo Santo of Pisa — as one of the faces of the progressively corrupt three dead in *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* which serves as an enclosed narrative in the sweeping eschatological programme of the fresco (see below, Chapter 6, and Plate 1).

Moving away from the face, we come to an area of the body that the art of the macabre frequently embellishes, but does so in a manner consistent with biological realism. The abdomen is the most volatile zone of the body in decay, as

[28] Mims, *When We Die*, p. 119.

[29] The latter term is Roach's (*Stiff*, p. 64).

medieval writers were aware, and necessitated quick intervention by embalmers. Putrefaction is evident here before anywhere else, with the lower regions of the body visibly and quickly transformed by the digestive organs' self-digestion soon after death. This process spreads throughout the abdomen, causing a greenish-blue discolouration which spreads from the vulva to the rest of the body.[30] Across the body, skin layers begin to stratify as escaping fluids leach between them, causing the wholesale destruction of the skin as bodily tissues progressively disintegrate and liquefy. As the methane and hydrogen sulphide caused by bacterial fermentation cannot leave the corpse, the body's cavities swell with the resulting gas, producing an inescapable odour. About a week after death the body cavities finally rupture, ending the corpse's period of bloating. Visible putrefaction continues, so that after about a month, tissues have fully liquefied, and hair, teeth, and nails are detachable. By now an exposed corpse will have no discernable organs remaining. Having liquefied, the resulting organic matter, often manifested as a yellowish, soupy substance, drains away.[31] After about a year, all that is left is the skeleton, bound together only by ligament tissue, which decays at a slower rate.

We have just read a catalogue of horrors which could be sustained by the moribund body as a schedule of biological events, events with which medieval sermonists could appear quite intimate. While macabre art tends to freeze the body at a single moment in time, macabre language can be more versatile, describing in some instances a sense of progression and variety that the above (deliberately bland) description tries to eschew. We see this energetic mode of narrating decay in the Old English poem *Soul and Body*, which survives in the tenth-century Exeter and Vercelli codices. This poem narrates the violence of rapid putrefaction, a violence accelerated by the personified agent of corruption — the captain earthworm 'Gifer', or Glutton — a creature imaginatively derived from a tissue of Old Testament references to consuming worms, and brought to life again, in part, some four centuries later in the fifteenth-century *Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms* (see below, Chapter 4):

> Biþ þæt heafod tohliden, honda tohleoþode,
> geaflas toginene, goman toslitene,
> seonwe beoð asogene, sweora bicowen;

[30] Camille finds visual correspondences with these visual signs in an illuminated version of Eustace Deschamps's *Lay de la fragilité humaine* of 1383, a translation of Innocent III's (Lotario dei Segni) *De miseria*; Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 177.

[31] Roach, *Stiff*, p. 68.

rib reafiað reþe wyrmas,
drincað hloþum hra, heolfres þurstge.
Bið seo tunge totogen on tyn healfe
hungrum to hroþor. Forþon heo ne mæg horsclice
wordum wrixlan wið þone wergan gæst.

(The head is split asunder, the hands disintegrate
jaws gape open, throat slit open
sinews sucked away, neck eaten through
ribs are reaved by ravenous worms
drinking from the body, thirsty for blood.
the tongue is torn in ten pieces
for their appetite. Therefore the body may not
bandy words with the sad ghost.)[32]

Where in the Exeter Book's grisly contribution to the genre of the Body and Soul debate decay becomes a function of pestilential warfare on the recumbent body, in reality too, the effects of decay would have been quite dynamic — a dynamism which some iconographers of *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead* employed ingeniously, showing, in the three variegated corpses, cadavers ranging from recently dead to long dead. This individualization of the corpse constitutes an implicit parody of another didactic motif of transience — the three ages of man — and is a variation which is in fact quite common in medieval Italy. It occurs (probably initially) in the mid-fourteenth-century *Trionfo della morte* of Pisa (above; and below, Chapter 6), and in other mural and manuscript treatments, such as at Malaspina Castle in Sardina and Subiaco in Lazio, and in a Franciscan hymnal, Biblioteca Comunale di Cortona, MS 91.[33] It extends beyond the Alps also in the Office of the Dead of the fourteenth-century Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg, and others, by northern French illuminators of the fourteenth century (see below, Chapter 5).

This potential variety of decay, here exploited artistically, has pathological and medical consequences too for those who 'read' the corpse. Today, especially in North America, 'body farms' — medical research centres which use donated

[32] *Soul and Body*, in *The Exeter Book*, pt II: *Poems IX–XXXII*, ed. by W. S. Mackie, EETS, o.s., 194 (London: Oxford University Press, 1934; repr. 1958), pp. 80–81 (ll. 103–10); translation mine.

[33] See David L. Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 139, for a reproduction of this image.

bodies — exist to map the varieties of decay to which bodies can succumb by studying human bodies in as diverse a condition of disposal as can be imagined.[34] The model of decomposition we have seen above outlines the sequence of events that befalls a corpse in the absence of embalming or pronounced environmental or medical contexts. These variables can exert huge influence on bodily decay; a body with septicaemia or open wounds for instance, will disintegrate more quickly than a 'healthy' corpse.[35] An exposed body will rot more quickly than a buried one, especially in warm weather, before even the depredations of animals and parasites are factored into the equation. Latter-day Gifer worms can make short work of the body from twenty-four hours after death. In extremely dry weather (of either hot or cold extremes), however, the body may instead undergo desiccation, leaving it mummified. Here, the moisture that renders the flesh 'edible' for parasites and organisms is absent. It is this consequent brown, 'leathery' skin of the dried-out mummy which seems to predominate in macabre iconography in the medieval and Renaissance period (and especially so in the most biologically faithful iconographic realizations of the macabre cadaver, by the sixteenth-century Bavarian artist Hans Baldung Grien).

Once buried, the rate of decomposition of the body varies depending on interference from ground water, soil organisms, and crucially, according to soil type. Acidic soil will inflict greater damage on the body, in some cases dissolving even the skeleton within a century. Alkaline, pH-neutral, and dry (particularly chalk) soils will, by contrast, slow the decomposition process, allowing, in exceptional conditions, the long-term preservation of delicate bones, softer cartilage, or even organs such as the brain.[36] The body's depth in the earth is also an important variable; shallow burials are more destructive of the body, and pre-modern burials were very shallow by today's standards. If a coffin is properly sealed against moisture, the body can in fact remain in a recognizable state for months, with the skin appearing only shrivelled and blemished by fungal spores. Lead coffins are even more effective in arresting decay. They are shown repeatedly in medieval narrative (and in more recent exhumations) to have preserved their contents in near-perfect condition. Such preserved remains (invariably comprising the privileged dead), provide a material basis for the frequent miracle stories and historical anecdotes — medieval and modern — of the unspotted bodies of saints and kings

[34] For an urbane discussion of the science (and art) of body farms, see Roach, *Stiff*, chap. 3.

[35] Daniell, *Death in England*, p. 120.

[36] Daniell, *Death in England*, p. 119.

exposed to view on the opening of tombs, at times to be followed by their immediate disintegration upon contact with air. One such poetic use of this science of a preserved body succumbing to decay in this way is in the Middle English *St Erkenwald*, which will be discussed below in Chapter 2.

The royal and saintly dead were always liable to receive embalmment, which would see, once the viscera and soft organs were removed, the abdomen and chest sluiced out with cleaning fluids and vinegar, and packed with salt and spices (a process naturalistically rendered in the late Middle English Romance *The Squire of Low Degree*, which we will discuss in some detail below). Once cleaned, the outer body was then wrapped in waxed cerements and applied with preservative unguents and spices.[37] The consequences of neglecting the treatment of the bowels, volatile even in death, were well known. In one notorious instance, when William the Conqueror's apparently un-embalmed corpse was hastily dispatched, morbid disaster, just short of farce, ensued, as recorded by the early twelfth-century chronicle of Orderic Vitalis:[38]

> Porro dum corpus in sarcofagum mitteretur, et uiolentur quia uas per imprudentiam cementariorum breue et strictum erat complicaretur pinuissimus uenter crepuit, et intolerabilis foetor circum astantes personas et reliquum uulgus impleuit, fumus thuris aliorumque aromatum de thuribulis copiose ascendebat sed teterrimum pudorem excludere non preualebat.
>
> (When the corpse was placed in the sarcophagus, and was forcibly doubled up because the masons had carelessly made the sarcophagus too short and narrow, the swollen bowels burst, and an intolerable stench assailed the nostrils of bystanders and the whole crowd. A thick smoke arose from the frankincense and other spices in the censers, but it was not strong enough to conceal the foul ignominy.)[39]

The familiar specular exemplarities of the medieval modes of reading history render this calamitous funeral fertile for moralization. Anticipating the social-levelling commentary formalized in the Dance of Death, Orderic asserts that a king's death is ultimately no different from a pauper's, and, amid a rhetorical sequence of morbid paradoxes, derived from the *ubi sunt* idiom, observes how 'he who had ruled over so many towns and castles and villages now lacked a plot of free earth for his own burial'. The king's disastrous burial becomes productively

[37] Mims, *When We Die*, p. 193. Rosemary Horrox, 'Purgatory, Prayer and Plague, 1150–1380', in *Death in England*, ed. by Jupp and Gittings, pp. 90–118 (pp. 99–100).

[38] Noted by Daniell in his discussion of embalmment, *Death in England*, p. 184.

[39] Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. by Marjorie Chibnall, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968–78), IV, 106–07.

revelatory of his moral destitution: 'His bowels, nourished with so many delicacies, shamefully burst, revealing to wise and foolish alike how vain is the glory of the flesh.' The sight of his body becomes a site for instructive meditation and improvement: 'All who beheld the corruption of that foul corpse learnt to strive earnestly through the salutary discipline of abstinence to earn better rewards than the delights of the flesh, which is earth, and will return to dust.'[40]

In these readings corruption is rooted in the bowels — a part of the anatomy that always prompted fulminatory excess in discourses against the body — as well as, materially, anxiety in those who must accompany the corpse. What we have above in Orderic's account is the medieval habit of reading divine providence and judgement from the commonplaces of nature (a pattern familiar from medieval bestiaries) which ultimately sites (every) man's macabre transformation as a defining aspect of his physical and moral identity. In dwelling on the viscera, the audience acknowledges too that the part of the body which corrupts most rapidly is the sign of those whose corruption is most profound — an exemplary embellishment of the refrains of the *contemptus mundi* which registers the evil of Everyman in his putrefaction. William is thus part of a long line of rulers whose moral corruption, and therefore physical corruption, is all the more potent in its being written emphatically in their visceral, explosive putridity. Medieval accounts turn again and again to historical figures whose decay — physical, and moral — patently exceeds their mortal limits; figures such as the Old Testament Antiochus from Macabees, Herod, and Judas Iscariot.

The rhetorical and moral embellishments that cluster around the viscera in the international language of *contemptus mundi* effectively make it the macabre idiom's erogenous zone. Throughout Latin Europe in pictorial art, abdomens often teem with vermicular infestation; yet stomach cavities, just as harrowingly, can be seen to remain empty. Frequently the visual motifs are merged, or indistinguishable, implying that either an embalmed corpse or a neglected one have progressed to the same state of decay. Later, highly realistic examples of tomb effigies show the sealed sutures of embalmment, such as the effigies of Louis XII († 1515) and Anne of Brittany († 1514) in St Denis Cathedral, whose recumbent figures *en transi* are shown as yet incorrupt, but jarringly scarred by the sutures of embalmment which preserve their patently youthful bodies.[41] Their *transis* are scarcely in physical transition, but show the full exercise of the embalmer's craft

[40] Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. by Chibnall, IV, 109.

[41] For illustrations and discussion, see Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, ed. by H. W. Janson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), pls 348 and 349.

to interdict the corruption of the body. Prostrate, open-mouthed, and all but naked, they are only partially concealed within a canopy. Above this the figures of the pair as they appear in life are represented as clothed praying figures, kneeling in the posture not only of the pair in life anticipating their own deaths but also, implicitly, as their supplicant souls who have left their corpses. The pair, indeed, were the first French monarchs to be memorialized by a double *transi* tomb — that is, one combing a living and dead effigy, but these dead effigies are decorously withheld from decay — and demonstrate the surgery which has made them, even in death, incorruptible, as is seemly for royal bodies, but no less humbled in death than a vermifluous, rotting *transi*.[42]

From Rot to Relic

The tomb effigies of Louis XII and his queen show, of course, a state of enforced preservation through embalmment which most of the dead would never share. Most people of the time were never even buried in coffins, but simply in a tightly sealed winding sheet. With nothing to protect them, the earth and the organisms of their shallow burials made short work of their bodies, so that often within only a year, the (almost, but not quite) clean bones remained, and, after any necessary cleaning, were harmless, and unremarkable enough, to be dug up to make way for fresh bodies, and displayed openly in ossuaries, as in the cloistered environments of cemeteries such as Holy Innocents in Paris or St Paul's in London. Here, by the fifteenth century, juxtaposed against the corrupt *transis* of the *Danse Macabre* mural, they would have reiterated, by their implied contrast, the destructiveness of death, the clean bones offset by images of corpses locked in perpetual decay. Such remains were biologically sterile, if not wholly emotionally so. Nonetheless, these dry bones could present different registers of morbid introspection, not simply the immediate physical nausea demanded from meditating on the rotting body. Study of the dried bones (an idea familiar from Scripture in the vision of the valley of dry bones of Ezekiel 37. 3) rather than the volatile *transi* is just as commonplace a *locus topicus* for sermon writers in the Middle Ages, who enjoin their audiences to personify these dry bones and imagine them speak, in the first-person, of the consequences of death. As we mentioned in the introduction, above, the rhetorical visit to the tomb is a commonplace of sermon literature from

[42] Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, p. 379.

the earliest times, in both the Eastern and Western Churches.[43] A Late West Saxon homily of around the beginning of the eleventh century (surviving in a late twelfth-century manuscript — Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343) is a paradigm of the instructive eloquence of human remains, in material ultimately derived from the writings of Caesarius of Arles, active in the late fifth and early sixth centuries:[44]

> Ac loca þenne on þa buri3nes & sea3 to þe sylfum 'Hwaet! Þaes mon iu on þissre worlde wunsumlice lyfede þe ic aer cuðe.' Þenne ma3on þa ðyrle ban us laeron, & þaes deaden dust of þare buri3nes to us cwaeðon wolden, 3if heo specen mihten.
>
> (But look then on the tombs and say to thyself, 'ah! This man once lived in this world, happily; I knew him once'. Then might the scoured bones us teach, and this dust of the dead man from his tomb speak [if these remains could speak]).[45]

Speaking, the bones warn 'as I am now, so will you be; mend yourself': the same commonplace of epitaphs dating from Roman times, which the three dead kings, unmediated by any assertion of the impossibility of their doing so, are seen in their reanimated, rotten state to speak, two centuries on from the Bodley sermons. As an alternative perspective, the Bodley 343 manuscript leaves us, in its final leaf, with a further vernacularization of the sight of the dead, not in prose, but in alliterative verse, a (possibly fragmentary) poem labelled by nineteenth-century editors *The Grave*, where a third voice addresses both the dead corpse internal to the poem and, implicitly, the external audience, cataloguing the humiliations of burial for both.

In the sermon however, it is the body that is imbued with agency and the moral authority to speak; the Bodley sermonist permits life to inhere in the decayed dead only by rhetorically contingent personification, parenthesized by his assertion of its impossibility:

[43] This is a tradition traced by Rosemary Woolf as 'the Warning from the Dead' in her magisterial study of the medieval religious lyric, *The English Religious Lyric*, and in Old English by J. E. Cross in *'The Dry Bones Speak* — A Theme in some Old English Homilies', *JEGP*, 56 (1957), 434–39.

[44] This homily is one of a group of seven unique late twelfth-century copies of Late West Saxon homilies, in a manuscript primarily consisting of the homiletic writings of Ælfric (died beginning of eleventh century).

[45] *Twelfth-Century Homilies in MS Bodley 343*, ed. and trans. by A. O. Belfour, EETS, o.s., 137 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1909; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1909), Homily XII, p. 125.

> Þenne, leofe men, þeah þe ða deade ban of þare buri3nes specon ne ma3on, þeah we ma3en us sylfaen be þam laeren: for þam þe we sceolen aefre 3emunen þaes ures heonnensiþes.
>
> (Then, dearly beloved, though the bones of the dead cannot speak from the tomb, we can all the same learn by them. For we must always remember our journey hence).[46]

Here, it is the imaginative exercise of rhetoric, not the narration of licensed supernatural life, that animates the dead, and offers models for their instructive study. These rhetorical gestures are later literalized and banalized in the pictorial cadavers of the macabre which show their audiences the animated dead. Such sermons, by the same token, need have required no literal brandishing of a skull by a preacher for physical exemplification — rhetorical display would have sufficed in place of the obvious indecorousness of physically wielding the bones of his congregation's relatives — but then, as any sermonist would have said, how would they be recognized? Publically, the ubiquity of clean human skulls in churchyards may easily have facilitated their proverbial and occasional use as didactic props, so that if the sermon concentrated on the activity of decomposition, then the end result could be seen, in a skull, before an audience, who would, in later centuries, in a cemetery like Holy Innocents, or an English church containing *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*, have had a variety of pictorial models of corruption awaiting them at any turn.

Ossuaries too were part of the emotional and iconographic corpus of macabre images in manuscripts (just as they were the physical site for painted macabre imagery, in a self-aware emblazoning of their social and imaginative roles). These arcades of dry bones were commonly shown in illustrations of the Office of the Dead amid graveyard burial scenes, and a fact of life in larger urban centres in the medieval West. These representations acted as imaginative surrogates for the burial rite which was never itself included in the Office of the Dead in Books of Hours. The office, as we have said, is a programme that guides the reader's thinking lyrically and empathically of the dead, and these scenes show the beginnings and ends of imagining the readers' existence, from the time they are removed from the physical world, into the more distant, intangible realm of the lyrical and imprecatory imagination — Purgatory. Developed iconographic examples show the newly buried body with its charnel-house peers, whose ranks, these dry bones silently admonish, every body will join in a matter of years. These scenes of uncounted bones act as a macabre surrogate too for the massed souls of Purgatory who await prayer — prayer which the Office of the Dead provided and

[46] *Twelfth-Century Homilies*, ed. and trans. by Belfour, Homily XII, p. 124.

regulated. Of course, such scenes, commonplace in art, were not confined to it; they are testimony to the social realities of the congestion of pre-modern graveyards. The sanitized dead — the dry bones — are piled high while their fresher peers are made short work of by the earth. Such scenes of disinterment produced in the contexts of the Hours of the Dead would spare the privileged readers of lavishly illuminated *horae* the horrifying sights and smells of such intensive use of burial ground which could see the dead dug up before being fully decomposed.

Indeed, the social and emotional implications of this over-hasty recycling of burials was long recognized. Boniface VIII's strictures on the division of corpses after his bull *Detestande feritatis* of 1299 specifically demanded a year in the earth for bodies before their bones could be deemed to be safely stripped of their flesh.[47] Nonetheless, depending on the environment (particularly one marked by cold winters), human bones could still remain 'quite greasy' and contain some organic material even after a full year in the earth — they are left dry (and brittle) only after half a century or so of burial.[48] The seventeenth-century poet George Herbert, in his lyric 'Death', gauges the amount of time required for the earth to produce a skeleton as 'some six or ten years, [...] | After the loss of life and sense, | Flesh being turned to dust and bones to sticks' (ll. 5, 7–8). His contemporary, John Donne, in his elegy 'The Relic' presents the morbid optimism of a speaker who imagines his future self (long buried) with a lock of his beloved's hair and now dug up to make way for a new burial:

> When my grave's broke up again
> Some second guest to entertain
> (For graves have learned that woman-head
> To be to more than one a bed),
> And he that digs it spies
> A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
> Will he not let's alone,
> And think that there a loving couple lies,
> Who thought that this device might be some way
> to make their souls, at the last busy day,
> Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?[49]

[47] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 177.

[48] Mims, *When We Die*, p. 123.

[49] John Donne, 'The Relic', in *Seventeenth-Century English Poetry: The Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Terence Dawson and Robert S. Dupree (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 58–59 (ll. 1–11).

Shakespeare's Hamlet, of course, can ironically hold forth on the gnomic sciences of inhumatory decay, which could creep into proverbiality. The cemetery of Holy Innocents in Paris was prized for the acute 'flesh eating' abilities of its soil, which, as Ariès has recorded, were believed to reduce a fresh corpse to bare bones in nine days, permitting, literally, a rapid turnover of inhabitants.[50] Yet such destructiveness was not always hidden in its operation; the signs of the 'industry' of these cemeteries constantly raised vexation amongst the living. Ariès has observed Dufour's recording of testimony of how, in Paris, in 1657, amid graveyards thronged with hawkers and leisure-seekers, 'people had to go about conducting a burial, reopening a tomb, and removing cadavers which were not yet entirely decomposed; here even in the dead of winter, the earth of the cemetery gave off mephitic odours'.[51] The ever-present smell of the grave was the cause for the decision of the Paris authorities in 1763 (in a policy not finally implemented for many years) to close down all graveyards within the city and open new cemeteries. The Procurator General, objecting to one new such metropolitan cemetery, complained of 'the fetid odours emitted by cadavers [...] the impure exhalations [...] [which] cling to the walls with a noisome essence'. In 1779 Holy Innocents itself was said to be discharging odours from a large fifty-foot common grave into the cellars of nearby houses.[52] The grave had to be opened and purged with quicklime. Innocents was finally closed in 1780, and the twenty thousand bodies still there were relocated to the Parisian catacombs.

Such sub-terrestrial odours, identifiable as (literally) redolent of the dead (and the inverted inspiration for the sweet odours emanating from saintly tombs), can cling unexpectedly and stubbornly to their environments. In 1695, there was a report of 'an unusual and pungent dew' in County Cork which reeked of the scent of cemeteries and graves. It was as though 'some sediment of them might possibly have occasioned this stinking dew'; an unappetizing inkling into how the soils of cemeteries can become oversaturated with the flesh of the dead they consume.[53] Resembling 'butter' to the eyewitness, who claimed it was used as

[50] Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, p. 58.

[51] Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. by Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974; repr. London: Boyars, 1976), p. 24, quoting from a citation in Valentin Dufour, *Paris à travers les âges*, 2 vols (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1875–82), of Berthold, *La Ville de Paris en vers burlesques: Journal d'un voyage à Paris en 1657*.

[52] Mims, *When We Die*, p. 125, who finds this account in Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*.

[53] Quoted in Clodagh Tait, *Death, Burial and Commemoration in Ireland, 1550–1650* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 64. This account is from J. C., 'Notes and Queries:

an unguent by the rural population, the substance was in all likelihood a freak depositing of adipocere (the subcutaneous fat discharged by decomposing corpses) caused by the fluids of decay evaporating along with groundwater from the cemetery's earth and falling again with the rain.[54] It is not too fanciful to attribute an allusion to this phenomenon in the first folio text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the Prince wishes his 'too too solid flesh would melt, | Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew' (I. 2. 129–30). A reading inflected by 'macabre' biological naturalism, to my mind, seems to offer the most fitting solution to a textual crux at this point in the play. Its two earlier quarto texts here read 'sallied flesh', that is, 'assailed', which seems to suggest a near-mixed metaphor of besieged flesh melting (not crumbling) under assault; where, in conventional wisdom, any solid flesh must, in the end, melt, assailed or not.

Imagination and Genre: Relics, Reflection, and the Eroticized Dead

So far in reading the literary life of the corpse we have confined ourselves to sermonized attitudes to the dead, witnessing the didactic repudiation of the objectified dead, and the paradox whereby a repugnant sight is continually recommended for memorialization as spiritually beneficial. These encounters with the dead offer us an index of rhetorical, and not strictly narrative, art. In order to gauge the capacities of macabre language in formalized narrative encounters with the dead we must turn to different texts. Examples such as the Bodley sermons (above), derived from Caesarius of Arles, suggest a rhetorical visit to the grave where the dead might speak if they could; yet other sermons, still ultimately derived from Caesarius, strip their accounts of any such conceptual decorum and render the imagined encounter of the living with the dead body as an actual dialogue with the anthropomorphized dead, where the dead themselves speak and describe their physical ruin for the benefit of the living. According to Rosemary Woolf, the voice of the dead was an innovation of Caesarius (who was known to Anglo-Saxon writers), a device that distinguishes his sermons from other early discourses on mortality by the fourth-century Eastern patristic writers John Chrysostom and Ephraem of Syria: their sermons represent the dead in a strict strategy of third-person objectification of the insensate and inaminate

Curious Aerial Deposit in Co Cork Two Centuries Ago', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 1 (1892), 249.

[54] See Barber, *Vampires*, pp. 108–09, and Mims, *When We Die*, p. 124, on this phenomenon.

corpse.[55] Thus, adapting Caesarius, the Anglo-Saxon vernacular, in the late tenth-century Blickling Homilies, demonstrates how the dry bones do indeed speak to the bereaved subject of Blickling Homily X. These anthropomorphized bones are still further imaginatively unfettered now by the regulatory *if they could speak*, which we have seen earlier in the Bodley Homily, above:

> Him þa tocleopadan þaes deadan ban, & þus cwaedon, 'Forhwon come þu hider us to sceawigenne? Nu þu miht her geseon moldan dael & wyrmes lafe, þaer þu aer gesawe godwen mid golde gefagod. Sceawa þaer nu dust & dryge ban, þaer þaer þu aer gesawe aefter flaeslicre gecyndre faegre leomu on to seonne.
>
> (Then the bones of the dead man called to him and thus said, wherefore have you come to see us? Now might you here see a measure of dust and food for worms, where once you would have seen rich clothes, woven with gold. See now dust and dry bones where before you saw fair limbs after flesh's kind, and fair to look upon.)[56]

Thus the relics of the dead describe themselves, rather than having the excoriating voice of the homilist do it for them. The rhetorical effect for the audience is little different, but does suggest imaginatively that the appearance of post-mortem human decay is to be the ongoing concern of both the appalled living and the humiliated (and perpetually conscious) dead — a stylized consciousness which lies at the heart of the lyric poetry of mortality from the Exeter and Vercelli texts of *Soul and Body* to the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, whose speakers continually remind audiences of what it is like — or going to be like — to be dead, as in Donne's 'The Relic' (see above).

It is clear, then, that literary engagement with the objectified dead can range in effect from being simply an exercise in rhetorical variety to becoming more of a mode of embellishing the patterns of extended didactic narrative, as we see in *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*. Here, rhetoric is not enough: narrative interest is furnished by grafting the traditional language of decay onto the generic patterns of an apparition narrative, onto, indeed, romance: an adventure in a wilderness. Yet not all narratives are as 'lively' as *The Three Dead*, and many later medieval exempla conform to the decidedly static patterns of sermonistic apostrophe and monstrance. In an example which we will read below, use of the corpse as trope can emerge as something approaching an imagined exercise in manhandling the corpse as if to make obvious the putative spiritual benefits of morbid reflection (realized in a lyric mode in Skelton's early sixteenth-

[55] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, pp. 401–02.

[56] *The Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. by Richard Morris, EETS, o.s., 58, 63, 73, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 112–13.

century 'Upon a Dead Man's Head'; see below, Chapter 6). A central impulse of these narratives is a considered manipulation of the sense of the desirability of the dead, a motif that has already been seen to lie in how the bereaved subject of Blickling Homily X is drawn by grief to revisit the bones of his friend. As we will see, this suggested desire is articulated elsewhere more systematically, though not, we might feel, as comprehensively as its potential narrative power might warrant. What we will turn to here is a modified language of sexual desire which rewrites and subverts the established patterns of the didactic desire for the dead, itself a rewriting of the obvious human reflex of the unwillingness to let the beloved dead go.

One such narrative, an exemplum from *An Alphabet of Tales*, a unique fifteenth-century English translation, existing only in BL, MS Additional 25719, of an early fourteenth-century collection of Latin sermon tales, the *Alphabetum narrationum*, by Arnold of Liège, offers a different mode of presenting imagined encounters with the dead in language from the sermon texts we have thus far seen.[57] The *Alphabet*'s narrative encounters are marked by impulses not merely to admonish, but to entertain, as all such sermon tales propagated by mendicant preachers in the later Middle Ages were always designed to do, in their lurid variations of stock narratives designed to arrest audiences (and liable also to be interchangeably reproduced in different English collections such as the *Gesta Romanorum* and Mirk's *Festial*, which we will have occasion to see). Here, in Tale CXXXII of the English *Alphabet*, the account is related in fewer than one hundred words of a holy man who secures his sexual continence by stealing the corpse of a dead woman — whom he had lusted after in life — and keeping it in his cell:

> So on a tyme a noder bruther of his come & tolde hym [th]at sho was berid & he grufe [*dug*] down vnto hur [*grave*] & beheld the fayr clothe [th]at sho was w[r]appid in, and he tuke hur vp & had hur vnto his cell. And a litle while after sho began to stynke, and he tuke hur oute & sayde, when he lukid on hur; 'Lo, flessh! now thou hase desyre, ffyll now thi luste on hur!'[58]

[57] On *An Alphabet of Tales* see Cooke, 'Tales', in *Manual*, IX, 3291–3321.

[58] *An Alphabet of Tales: An English 15th Century Translation of the 'Alphabetum narrationum' of Étienne de Besançon, from Additional MS. 25,719 of the British Museum*, ed. by Mary Macleod Banks, EETS, o.s., 126, 127, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1904–05), I, 93; citations of the *Alphabet* are from this edition, cited by page number (my modernization). J. A. Herbert, in 'The Authorship of the *Alphabetum Narrationum*', *The Library*, ser. 2, 6 (1905), 94–101, dismissed its former attribution as Éteinne de Besançon's.

> (So upon a time another brother of his came and told him where she was buried, and he dug down unto her grave and beheld the fair cloth that she was wrapped in, and he took her up and brought her into his cell. And after a little while she began to stink, and he took her out and said, when he looked on her, 'lo, flesh, now you have your desire, fulfil now your lust upon her!')

No longer, then, do we simply have the visit to the tomb as a kind of window-shopping of specular instruction in the future horrors of death, but rather a take-away menu, as it were, of admonitory flesh for domestic consumption. What emerges here is a gendered rewriting of the *contemptus mundi*'s conventions of execrating the corpse, heavily inflected now with misogyny and necrophilia; a fusion of commonplace (we might say perfectly medieval) impulses, which we will find adopted in *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms*, and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* (see below, Chapter 4). In comparison to the Bodley sermonist, we move from a use of the dead as an example against the flesh of fragile Everyman, to a gendered admonition by man against female flesh in particular. The point of the story is of course, as designated by its rubric — 'Carnis tempacioni [*sic*] reprimunt fetor et horror mulieris mortue' — the abatement of physical desire, a purpose utterly different from the Bodley sermon and texts like it.[59] It is, on the face of it, not a warning of mortality at all, but a warning against women and concupiscence. The participation of the dead in these texts — whether in *contemptus* tracts addressing pride or, as here, sermon tales arguing against lust — is almost incidental. The *Alphabet*'s tale patently evokes medieval clerical antifeminism which was always liable to integrate into the discourse of contempt for the world a concomitant contempt of women, readily summed up by Odilo of Cluny's remarks on the female body in its embrace: 'We, who would be loath to touch vomit or dung even with our fingertip — how can we desire to clasp in our arms the bag of excrement itself?'[60] Similarly, the final outburst from the *Alphabet*'s monk, which sees him goading his own flesh to sate itself upon her if it still can tolerate her, is an oblique rewriting of the late twelfth-century *Golden Legend*'s tale (transmitted too in a host of vernacular translations, including several in Middle English) of the desert ascetic St Macarius, who made his bed in the wilderness in a pagan tomb, lying down with (pagan) dead bodies:

> Macarius abbas descendit per vastitatem deserti et intravit dormire in monumentum, ubi sepulta erant corpora paganorum, et extraxit unum corpus sub caput suum tamquam pulvinarium. Daemones autem volentes eum terrere vocabant quasi unam mulierem

[59] *An Alphabet of Tales*, I, 93.

[60] Quoted in Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, p. 111.

> dicentes: 'Surge et veni nobiscum ad balneum.' Et alter daemon sub ipso tamquam ex mortuo illo dicebat: 'Peregrinum quendam habeo super me, non possum venire.' Ille autem non expavit, sed respondebat corpori illi dicens: 'Surge et vade, si potes.' Et audientes daemones fugerunt voce magna clamantes: 'Vicisti nos, domine.'[61]

We might offer the early fifteenth-century English translation from the *Gilte legende*, whose orthography I have modernized:

> Makarie went out of a place of desert and went unto the sepulchre of a dead man and laid his head down upon the dead body instead of a pillow. And the fiend thought to make him afraid and called the body [i.e. *the body called out*] as he had been a woman and said: 'Arise, up, go we to the bath'. And the other fiend that lay under Makarie's head said, as though he had been dead [i.e. *as if his 'life' was in danger*]: 'I have a strange man upon me that I may not rise'. And Makarie dred him nothing but beat the body and said: 'Arise up if thou maist'. And when the fiends heard him they fled, crying with highe voice: 'Allas, thou hast overcome us'.[62]

These speaking, recumbent (and implicity putrescent) dead are, however, carefully regulated as those speaking only with the voices of possessing demons, and not those of the preternaturally conscious dead.[63] In the *Alphabet*'s narrative, the only thing urged to 'rise', suggestively, is the monk's own flesh, which should, for monks (and, by exemplary extension, everyone), be as moribund as that of a dead body with respect to the (living) bodies of women.

There are many versions of this tale in didactic collections (even within the *Alphabet*'s collection itself), and, laconic as these narratives are (to be embellished at will by the preacher), they offer a certain fascination in their spare narration of brusque emotional gestures; imprecise echoes of some of the human impulses which they were designed to help interdict. We need not infer, naturally, that necrophiliac grave-robbing was much of a problem in the Middle Ages (even if the robbing of saints' relics could be), but what is suggested here is a kind of emotional gesture which is interesting in its evoking the outlines of an erotic, fantasized response to the dead (despite their putridity), and not a solely exemplary or didactic one, which is what we have been concerned with so far.

Nonetheless, any erotic or sentimental response to the bodies of the dead is hard to find in medieval literature, even though it emerges elsewhere in popular

[61] Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. by Rainer Nickel (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1988), p. 102.

[62] *Gilte legende*, ed. by Richard Hamer, EETS, o.s., 327–28, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006–07), I, 93.

[63] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 83, provides an illustration of this scene from an early fourteenth-century *Miroir historial* in Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5080, fol. 328^{v}.

writing of later date. Some early-modern English ballads witness the theme of the lover's vigil by the grave of the beloved, or 'the unquiet grave'. This is a term applied to an international ballad type, one variation of which, from the south of England, was collected in the late nineteenth century by Francis Child in his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. This kind of narrative is part of a widespread folk tradition of the dead lover speaking from the grave, and, as oral literature, can be imagined to stem from a point antedating by some margin its first recording. The obvious point that these ballads introduce a motif not witnessed in the medieval didactic tale read above — the desired dead answering back — is almost beside the point. In these sentimental, pan-European narratives, the dead are no longer undesirable: sexual and emotional desire transcends the dereliction of the corpse. These narratives take our discussion from the literary life of the inert, inanimate body to a discussion of the imagined life of the *revenant* — the category of the dead which is the theme of the next chapter. Yet the line between both concepts — insensate corpse, and ghost — is easily, and productively, blurred in these contexts. The unquiet grave motif suggests for us an evocative, even romantic, idea — the desirable dead — which if not readily witnessed in medieval *written* culture, may yet have existed in unofficial discourse. Such a romantic notion — latent physical horror of the dead sublimated by erotic desire — seems emblematic of romantic, 'gothic' writing. Ariès adduces one nineteenth-century image of the distraught lover seizing the body of his beloved from an opened grave — an image perfectly illustrative of a cultural phase which, he points out, gave us a new word for such desires: 'morbid'.[64] The macabre, attenuated by aesthetic pleasure becomes the merely morbid, it seems. Yet even morbidity presents its imaginative outrages: the disruption of kind implicit in such desire for the dead is readily illustrated in the nineteenth-century English ballad, where a dead girl's buried corpse, disturbed by her lover's year-long vigil, speaks to him from the grave that he refuses to leave:

> You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips
> But my breath smells earthy strong
> If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips
> Your time will not be long.[65]

[64] Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, pp. 210–11 and 214.

[65] *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. by F. J. Child, 5 vols (1882–98; repr. New York: Dover, 1965), II, 236 (ll. 5–8).

A contemporary Irish version relates the buried girl discharging only the most halfhearted of warnings against her lover, but one which emphasizes still her physical unattractiveness in death; the most commonsensical reproof, it might be imagined, to desiring the embrace of the dead: 'ní ham duitse luí liom | Tá boladh fuar na cré orm | Dath na gréine is na gaoithe (this isn't the time for you to be lying by me — there's a stink of cold earth on me, and the colouring of the sun, and the wind).[66]

Ultimately, this is the posture — a disconsolate mourner, whose grief induces him to keep watch over the grave — which lies behind the late fourteenth-century anonymous English *Pearl*, an elegy which explores complex strategies for engaging with the earthly memory of the deceased: reconcilement with knowledge of their ongoing physical decay, and hope (in a Christian reading the confirmation of a certainty) of their spiritual transcendence and salvation. An abiding concern of official medieval Christian attitudes (and their attendant exemplary narratives) was to prolong memory of the dead without prolonging to extremes an intemperate human grief which queries providence. By this token then, *Pearl* is an interrogation of such a problem, and its solution. The text explores the problem of the human desire to see the dead return to mortal life and thereby deny them and everyone, in a Christian reading, the bliss of Heaven. In *Pearl* the bereaved father of an infant is engaged in colloquy with his dead daughter, a dialogue whose impossibility is adumbrated by the authoritative device of a dream-vision. At the poem's beginning, the distraught father loses consciousness upon his infant daughter's grave-mound — a posture redolent of the intemperate mourners of the unquiet grave motif — and, in the ensuing dream, is accorded a scripturally authorized revelation of the destiny of his dead daughter, who is now transfigured, appearing to him as a young woman, and one of the 144,000 brides of the Lamb.

The vision shows that the promise of Christian salvation must overwhelm the human emotions of bereavement. In this text, mortal loss and the language of grief is transformed through the central symbol of the pearl, just as the symbol of the girl's body in death — a pearl, lost to earth, threatened by corruption (ll. 1–8) — is transformed into a symbol of Heaven and eternal life: the scriptural pearl of great price for which all (mortal) things must be sold. This leap of faith through symbolism marks a repudiation of intimacy with the corpse — the poem's eschatological strategy demands leaving the body behind and offers its audience a

[66] *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, ed. by Seán Ó Tuama, trans. by Thomas Kinsella (Dublin: Foras na Gaeilge, 1981), p. 312 (my translation).

programme of ideas and rhetoric of rather more complexity than that of the simple harmfulness of bodily contact with the dead as witnessed in the ballads. This admonition marks for us a continuing engagement with the language and imagination of the macabre — the mode in which the dead are most unwholesomely configured. Even in *Pearl*, where the dead appear at their most transcendent, the grim banalities of the macabre, indeed the natural, destiny of the body can still be invoked, as where the Pearl-maiden tells her erstwhile father why he cannot cross the stream of life which flows from the throne of the Lamb, cutting him off from the Celestial Jerusalem and her: first he must die and rot, echoing the scriptural prescription of Corinthians 1. 15; flesh and blood cannot be admitted to Heaven:

> Þou wylne3 ouer þys water to weue;
> Er moste þou ceuer to oþer counsayle:
> Þy corse in clot mot calder keue.
> For hit wat3 forgarte at Paradys greue;
> Oure 3orefader hit con mysse3eme.
> Þur3 drwry deth bo3 vch man dreue,
> Er ouer þys dam hym Dry3tyn deme.
>
> (You think over this stream to wade —
> firstly you must take better counsel:
> Your corpse in clods must lie cold,
> for it was lost after all in Paradise,
> which our forefather may well regret.
> Through dreary Death must each man be drawn
> Ere over this dam he Salvator sees.)[67]

Pearl is a revolutionary vernacular text for medieval audiences, profoundly human in its acknowledgement of the personal consequences of grief against the demands of doctrine: it is a text which we will consider again in Chapter 3.

Pearl, of course, yields a complex repudiation of the desirable dead which the popular ballads, with their simpler style and intention, cannot emulate, even if *Pearl* does seem to begin with a motif — the unquiet grave — which they share. In the popular ballads, we see how the nauseating physical attributes of the dead are implicitly presented as the naturalistic curbs to intoxicating human desire and irrationality in bereavement and not, as we have witnessed in sermon-

[67] *Pearl*, ed. by E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953; repr. 1966), ll. 318–24; my translation. Subsequent citations of the Pearl refer to this edition.

discourse, human pride. This then, is an index of the imaginative contexts in which the dead could be wielded, even if both uses remains admonitory. Such early modern ballads remain, like sermon exempla, cautionary stories, but, independent from expressly devotional contexts, they offer demotic exemplifications for their audiences of the disruptive ends of untrammelled grief. Life must go on, if not for the irreconciled living, then, in popular wisdom, for the dead — whose 'life' in death must not be disturbed by the emotional incontinence of those they leave behind.

Yet this gnomic reading of the nature of grief could be adduced to more exemplary contexts too. Child attests a medieval analogue to the ballad pattern of the unquiet grave in *The Golden Legend*'s story of St John Almoner, who rises from his grave (transfigured as a resplendent figure in white) owing to the noise and copious tears of a female mourner.[68] A saint is, of course, even less needful of redundant human grief than are most of those who die in Christ.

Yet such postulated, and perhaps overly 'anthropological', readings of the patterns of the desire of the ballad-bereaved can amount to overanalysis. The 'paradigm' of the unquiet grave is in the end nothing more than a convenient and effective exercise in romantic pathos, using morbid vocabulary. The theme deploys the principle of the eroticized, sentimentalized dead witnessed in most ballads (from the lachrymose to downright bloodthirsty), figures sentimentalized and eroticized precisely because of their youth. The untimely death of young lovers is of course the paradigm of death and bereavement which stimulates most pathos and narrative interest because, socially, it is the least to be desired and least apt to induce reconcilement. The implacable, bereaved lover lamenting his dead beloved is (if we assume its medieval currency before its modern ballad witnesses) the essential motif lurking behind the *Alphabet*'s tale of the lust-enraged monk, subject now to a didactic reworking which transforms the language of the disconsolate lover's unwholesome attachment to the remains of his beloved into an admonishment against the flesh. Yet this narrative posture too is an impulse only slightly removed from the literary motif of the vigil over the corpse often seen in medieval romance. The ballad-type of the unquiet grave itself — a vigil maintained long after death with a corpse that asks for it to cease — is more or less the opposite to the pattern of medieval exempla where the dead themselves urge perpetual memorialization (though not, as we have said, grief), and is of itself to be presumed an emotional, social commonplace, if not quite uniformly a literary one in the medieval period.

[68] *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. by Child, II, 235.

Outside of the later ballad formulation, the language of sentimental and indecorous physical attachment to the dead is discernible in many other medieval narratives. The exposure of the heart of the dead lover is an extreme variant of this motif (seen in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, IV. 1 and IV. 9, and its Middle English romance witness *The Knight of Curtesy* — a treatment of the apocryphal murder of the trouvère Le Chatelain de Couci), or the intertwining of trees growing from the graves of the dead couple (as in versions of the Irish saga of *Deirdre* or versions of *Tristan*).

Earnest, Burlesque, and Marvel: The Pliable Dead

A more solemn, and scripturally authorized, treatment of the compounding of the memory of the deceased with their decaying remains is witnessed in Tale XLIV of the *Gesta Romanorum* (a mid-fifteenth-century English prose redaction, existing in many recensions, of a thirteenth-century Anglo-Latin tale collection) concerning the three widowed daughters of the fictional emperor Saturninus.[69] The tales of this collection are from a variety of sources, each with an interpretative *moralité* or *declaracio* of what each tale supposedly allegorizes. The allegory in some cases scarcely fits the tale recounted, and seems the result of some considerable effort on the part of the compiler to propose a moral scheme to the random elements of the foregone story. Most draw their dramatic impact from their taut, unelaborated narrative style, and in some cases a twist in the tale — usually a resolving deed of punishment, often magically or providentially ordained. As will be seen in this, and in subsequent examples throughout this study, a prominent dramatizing device in these 'skeletal' narratives is a dramatic exploitation of human apprehension of the dead. It goes without saying that these tales do not brook overanalysis — it is not their language which is of 'quotable' interest but the way in which drama and emotion is economically sketched. In these examples, brief, dramatic gestures using motifs exploitative of morbid anxiety

[69] Account and summary of the *Gesta Romanorum* by Cooke, 'Tales', in *Manual*, IX, 3284– 91. The five fifteenth-century English manuscripts and one print by de Worde each contain different tales. S. J. Herrtage's edition (EETS, e.s., 33 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1879; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962)) is based on BL, MS Additional 9066 and MS Harley 7333, together with Cambridge University Library, MS Kk. 1. 6, which together yield a total of around a hundred tales. These include Marian miracles and animal fables not proper to the Latin texts of the *Gesta*. Subsequent citations of the *Gesta Romanorum* are from Herrtage's edition, cited by page number; translations are mine.

can produce highly engaging and vivid tales, and this is a collection to which we will have frequent recourse. Here, in Tale XLIV, when offered a new match by her father upon being widowed, his youngest daughter refuses, explaining:

> holy chvrche tellith vs, that a man & a woman couplid to-geder in matrimony er oo [*one*] body, and two in souvle, So that my body is the body of my husbonde, and yf the fleshe be so deer, thenne ere the boones eke; & therefor, as longe as eny bone is in the sepulcure of my husbonde, as longe shulle I neuer be couplid to noon other thane to him. (p. 173)
>
> (Holy Church tells us that a man and a woman coupled together in matrimony are one body, and two in soul, so that my body is the body of my husband, and if the flesh be so dear, then are the bones also. And therefore, as long as any bone is in the sepulchre of my husband, then for so long will I never be coupled to other than he.)

The wedlock vows are to be amended to 'till death *and* decay do them part' in this reading. This is a clear moralization and literalization of the institution of marriage in Genesis 2. 24 where man 'shall cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh' (et adherebit uxori suae et erunt duo in carne una). Here its exegesis is of a singularly macabre hue, with 'one flesh' pedantically resolved to apply to the dry bones as much as to the flesh of the dead spouse in the youngest daughter's morbid expostulation. This too constitutes an extravagant assertion of marital fidelity, rhetoric which is generic to the medieval catalogues of virtuous women and their utterances. Such unity of the flesh incurs similarly morbid expression in *Handlying Synne*, the early fourteenth-century English translation of the *Manuel des Pechiez*, where a dead adulteress is divinely punished in a symbolic partition of the body she parted from marital fidelity. Her body — flesh — which should have remained 'united' in matrimony, is shown (when her tomb is opened) to be, in the most transparent symbolism, split in two at the waist (with a dragon nestling in the gap), the perfect illustration of otherworldly *contrapasso* or countermovement to sin — as formulated by Dante. If the exemplary revelation of the contents of tombs is here only obliquely 'macabre', then in the *Gesta*'s example of wifely fidelity, such macabre language becomes an index not of opprobrium but humility — a posture expected of virtuous, not wicked wives. Such a posture is (as we will see) adopted in *The Squire of Low Degree*, by the figure of the Princess of Hungary, who honours the increasingly paltry physical residue of her (presumed) dead beloved, as does the *Gesta*'s daughter for her husband. In the *Gesta*, and, in a mode amplified and romanced in *Squire*, we are lent, however inferentially, a portrait of a female figure who does not shirk from ruminating on the physical processes her dead spouse undergoes in the tomb. Yet the *moralité* of the tale (if not the narrative) in the *Gesta* is deafeningly uninterested in themes of mortality, only acknowledging that the marriage

of the three daughters of the Emperor (the 'fadir of heuen') was original sin, each wedding Pride of Life (the devil), 'couetisse of yen' (the world), and flesh (*sensualite*).

Between Game and Earnest: Watching the Body and Keeping Romance Alive in 'The Squire of Low Degree' and 'Sir Triamour'

The sentimental, sensual attachment to the human corpse is exploited to more ambivalent ends in the Middle English romance *The Squire of Low Degree*. This late chivalric romance, dating from not much earlier than the beginning of the sixteenth century, exists complete only in a sixteenth-century print by William Copeland, in addition to two fragments of a print by Wynkyn de Worde. There is also a 'corrupt' version of the text in the seventeenth-century Percy Folio (BL, MS Additional 27879), an important manuscript anthology of earlier medieval texts, romances, and ballads, to which we will be returning. *Squire* centres on the comic abuse of the body, but wields the corpse not only in its obvious gestures of comic necrophilia but also in its exploitation of the audience's expectation of the didactic conventions of the use of the dead body as injunction to spurn the delights of the world. From an earnest model of the unquiet dead motif's representation of a vigil inflected by macabre language and imagery, we can trace a parodic deployment of the idea in *Squire*. Up to now we have largely been concerned with a tradition of imagining the dead in language that is ultimately utilitarian — the language of sermons and moral admonishment. In turning to *Squire* we now need to read the dead in different generic contexts: see them in the language of literary imagination and in the language of entertainment.

At the centre of this highly idiosyncratic text is a protracted, burlesque meditation on the body in death and transience. At issue for us in reading the text is the inflection of its genre — popular romance — by unexpected configurations of image and motif, which implicitly present this text as an interrogation of romance and its enduring qualities as a genre. *Squire* is marked by 'imperishable' (that is, continually reiterated) narrative commonplaces, even as it promotes a central symbol of decay in the failed embalmment of the figure of the villainous steward. The text's engagement with themes of morbidity reside in the narrative interest accorded to farcical disposal of a corpse, and also a rhetorical *ubi sunt* and *contemptus mundi* sequence vocalized in one of the character's dismissal of the joys of life in her mistaken belief that her lover — the central corpse — is dead. This idea of *contemptus mundi* is of course a familiar gesture in romance — Lancelot

and Guinevere ultimately adopt the habits of penitents, and the hero of the late fourteenth-century *Guy of Warwick* renounces his chivalric career for the life of a hermit. *Squire* amplifies this familiar romance gesture with its idiosyncratic obsession with morbidity — or at least its burlesque resonances. Its central episode — a bizarre case of saintly enshrinement for a wholly unsaintly body — is a parodic reprise of the saintly veneration of the beloved's living body in courtly romance, such as in Chrétien's *Lancelot*. Here, however, the farcical episode of the Princess of Hungary's adoration of a corpse which she believes to be that of her beloved is predicated on a macabre case of mistaken identity. Mistaken and assumed identities, presumed death, and false resurrection — typical narrative devices — are reinvested here with an acute sense of the grotesque and the macabre. The Squire, before setting off on his seven-year grand tour to prove his love for the Princess, calls on her to take his leave. Straight away ambushed by his rival — the stock jealous steward, Sir Marados, and his men — the Squire fights them off and kills Marados. The Steward's men, seemingly under orders from her father, the King, take the Squire into custody and disguise the dead steward in the Squire's clothes and disfigure the dead man's face. This is merely the first of an increasingly bizarre set of post-mortem procedures undergone by the dead steward, who is afforded the same potential to cling to the lives of the lovers in death as if he had remained alive. The fact that he does so now as a macabre enforcer of chastity takes to a bizarre and engaging conclusion the Steward's disruptive role of automatic malignity in romance, yet the vigil and protracted grief of the Princess for her dead lover is a formula established in other medieval romances, where noblewomen maintain vigils over their slain champions.

In the fourteenth-century English tail-rhyme romance *Sir Triamour*, this formulaic iteration of the vigil seems also to take leave of narrative decorum. In this text we have a reworking of the hagiographic motif of saintly burial and the guarding of bodily relics. This is compounded further with the motif of the loyalty of hounds — a loyalty established, with the specific example of grave-guarding, in medieval bestiaries. In *Sir Triamour*, the corpse of the virtuous Sir Roger, the only defender of the traduced and exiled queen of Aragon, lies on the spot of his murder until it begins to putrefy. His loyal hound, called Truelove, who has been guarding it since Sir Roger's death, interns the corpse in a cairn when he realizes he cannot revive his master by licking him:

> Hys gode hownde, for wele nor woo,
> Wolde not fro hys mayster goo,
> But lay lykyng hys wondys.
> He wende to have helyd hym agayne;

Therto he dyd all hys mayne —
Grete kyndenes ys in howndys!
He lykkyd hym tyll he stanke,
Than he began, and kenne hym thanke,
To make a pytt of ston;
And to berye hym was hys purpos,
And scraped on hym both ryn and mosse,
And fro hym nevyr wolde gon.[70]

(His good hound, for weal or woe, would not from his master go, but lay licking his wounds. He thought to have healed him again — therto he did all he could — great kindness is in hounds! He licked him till he stank, then he began, and bethought him, to make a pit of stone, and to bury him — such was his purpose — and scraped on him both bark and moss, and from him never would go.)

After a vigil of seven years, the dog apparently has a flash of inspiration: he returns to the Aragonese court and kills Marrok, the evil steward who slew Sir Roger. The dog then leads the King and his retinue to Sir Roger's cairn. Roger's body (apparently in contradiction to the text's own account), is found to be incorrupt as a martyr's, 'as hole as it was layd' (l. 567). If nothing else, the knight's quasi-martyrial incorruption is a device whereby his body can ultimately be recognized and decorously reinterred. In a more implicitly supernatural manner, redolent of folk-jurisprudence of the silent testimony of the corpse in the presence of its killer, it is not to lapse into decay until after his killer is found (l. 548). The pagan judge of *St Erkenwald*, by the same token (see below, Chapter 2), will not lapse into decay until a more theologically complex satisfaction is achieved.

Marrok, having been killed by the hound, is posthumously hanged, drawn, and quartered, and the dog ultimately pines away on his master's new grave (ll. 578–88). The seven-year inhumation of the virtuous Sir Roger in *Sir Triamour* thus matches the malign steward's seven-year embalmment in *The Squire of Low Degree*. Both burials act as a sign of hiatus — the seven-year trial-period of romance — from whence the fortunes of the hero will eventually be resuscitated. We might imagine that a medieval audience might (since the text offers none) 'gloss' the burial episode of Triamour as the temporary loss of the true love (fidelity) between the exiled queen of Aragon and her king by whom she has been unjustly exiled. Yet such true love, symbolized in the corpse of Sir Roger, is recovered at the end of seven years wholly preserved. And it is with this latent

[70] *Sir Triamour*, in *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. by Jennifer Fellows (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 147–49 (ll. 382–93); my translation.

symbolic recovery in exhuming Roger that the King of Aragon commences his literal quest to retrieve his lost queen. He and she are reunited at last, in love, by their son Triamour, whose name too can be interpreted as 'true love' or 'tested love'. Preserved in the hound True-Love's burial of Roger, marital true love is resuscitated — renewed, as it were — in the young knight Triamour, their child. The symbol of their fidelity is no longer a neglected (albeit indestructible) corpse but rather their son, product of the pregnancy which instigated the Queen's exile in Marrok's calumny (that she was pregnant by another man). All are thus ultimately reunited by the living symbol of their former fidelity.

Here then, with the bodies of the Steward Marados and Sir Roger, is a macabre testament to (and parody of) the fidelity of the loving pair amid the marathon separations of romance. Such miraculous preservation as in *Sir Triamour* is denied the Princess's presumed beloved in *The Squire of Low Degree*. Sir Roger is preserved as an emblem of fidelity and truth, as the only true champion of the falsely accused queen of Aragon. No such quasi-saintly virtue inheres within the Steward's body in *The Squire of Low Degree*. As the object of the Princess's misdirected devotion, Marados is in no sense destined for divine conservation from corruption; his body must be preserved artificially. In a near-erotic gesture, the naked princess takes the Steward's body into her room, always believing it to be that of the Squire. She undertakes her own private funerary rituals — a secret embalming and enshrinement of the corpse — which accurately describes medieval funerary practice available to the wealthier dead:

> Into the chamber she did him bere;
> His bowels soone she did out draw
> And buried them in Goddes law.
> She sered that body with specery,
> With virgin wax and cummendry [*dry cumin*];
> And closed him in a maser tree [*maple box*]
> And set on him lockes three.
> She put him in a marble stone
> With quaint ginnes [*devices*] many one
> And set him at hir beddes head;
> And every day she kist that dead.[71]

[71] Donald B. Sands, *Middle English Verse Romances* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), pp. 249–78 (ll. 684–94).

Such earnest necrophilia, still recognizable as part of the devotions that could be given to the remains of saints, morbidly inflects the literary language of the 'religion' of love, part of the courtly hyperbole of lovers. This posture — treating the beloved's body as an (implicitly) dead saint — can be seen even (albeit without the specifics of macabre burial) in the dawn of courtly romance, in Chrétien de Troyes's late twelfth-century *Lancelot*. In one famous episode, the narrator observes how Lancelot, in his night of lovemaking with the captive Guinevere, pays such devotions to her as were never paid to a holy body, that is, relic: 'Et puis vint au lit la reïne, | Si l'aore et se li ancline | Car an nul cors saint ne croit tant' (He comes to the bed of the Queen, kneels, and adores her, as no holy relic ever was; ll. 4651–53).[72]

Aside from the commonplace of extravagant devotion so saintly (or mock-saintly) bodies, we must look elsewhere for the material that furnishes the basic plot — love interrupted by death, but commemorated by reliquary enshrinement — of *Squire*. The Princess's treatment of the relics of her lover echoes Boccaccio's tale of the lover's head in a pot of basil in *Decameron*, IV. 5, a story in *Decameron*'s fourth day on the matters of love, tragedy, and morbidity.[73] Here, the young Lisabetta hides the head of her lover Lorenzo (murdered by her brothers), in a pot of basil after his ghost appears to her in a dream, revealing his grave to her:

> Poi la mattina levata, non avendo ardire di dire alcuna cosa a' fratelli, propose di volere andare al mostrato luogo e di vedere se ciò fosse vero che nel sonno l'era paruto [...]. E tolte via foglie secche che nel luogo erano, dove men dura le parve la terra, quivi cavò; né ebbe guari cavato, che ella trovò il corpo del suo misero amante in niuna cosa ancora guasto né corrotto; per che manifestamente conobbe essere stata vera la sua visione. Di che piú che altra femina dolorosa, conoscendo che quivi non era da piagnere, se avesse potuto volentier tutto il corpo n'avrebbe portato per dargli piú convenevole sepoltura; ma, veggendo che ciò esser non poteva, con un coltello il meglio che poté gli spiccò dallo 'mbusto la testa, e quella in uno asciugatoio inviluppata e la terra sopra l'altro corpo gittata, mèssala in grembo alla fante, senza essere stata da alcun veduta, quindi si dipartì e tornossene a casa sua. Quivi con questa testa nella sua camera rinchiusasi, sopra essa lungamente e amaramente pianse, tanto che tutta con le sue lagrime la lavò, mille basci dandole in ogni parte. Poi prese un grande e un bel testo, di questi ne' quali si pianta la persa o il basilico, e dentro la vi mise fasciata in un bel drappo; e poi messavi sù la terra, sù vi piantò parecchi piedi di bellissimo basilico salernetano, e quegli da niuna altra acqua che

[72] Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la charrette, ou Le Roman de Lancelot*, ed. by Charles Méla (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1996), p. 322; my translation.

[73] This analogue has been observed by Sands, *Middle English Verse Romances*, and W. H. French and C. B. Hale (*Middle English Metrical Romances* (New York: Russell, 1930; repr. 1964)) in their anthologies of Middle English romance.

> o rosata o di fior d'aranci o delle sue lagrime non innaffiava giammai. E per usanza avea preso di sedersi sempre a questo testo vicina, e quello con tutto il suo disidero vagheggiare, sì come quello che il suo Lorenzo teneva nascoso: e poi che molto vagheggiato l'avea, sopr'esso andatasene, cominciava a piagnere, e per lungo spazio, tanto che tutto il basilico bagnava, piagnea.
>
> (And when morning came, and she was risen, not daring to say aught to her brothers, she resolved to go to the place indicated in the vision, and see if what she had dreamed were even as it had appeared to her. [...] She began to dig where the earth seemed least hard. Nor had she dug long, before she found the body of her hapless lover, whereon as yet there was no trace of corruption or decay; and thus she saw without any manner of doubt that her vision was true. And so, saddest of women, knowing that she might not bewail him there, she would gladly, if she could, have carried away the body and given it more honourable sepulture elsewhere; but as she might not so do, she took a knife, and, as best she could, severed the head from the trunk, and wrapped it in a napkin and laid it in the lap of her maid; and having covered the rest of the corpse with earth, she left the spot, having been seen by none, and went home. There she shut herself up in her room with the head, and kissed it a thousand times in every part, and wept long and bitterly over it, till she had bathed it in her tears. She then wrapped it in a piece of fine cloth, and set it in a large and beautiful pot of the sort in which marjoram or basil is planted, and covered it with earth, and therein planted some roots of the goodliest basil of Salerno, and drenched them only with her tears, or water perfumed with roses or orange-blossoms. And 'twas her wont ever to sit beside this pot, and, all her soul one yearning, to pore upon it, as that which enshrined her Lorenzo, and when long time she had so done, she would bend over it, and weep a great while, until the basil was quite bathed in her tears.)[74]

The plant thrives as it is fertilized by the dead youth's head and the tears of the girl:

> Il basilico, sì per lo lungo e continuo studio, sì per la grassezza della terra procedente dalla testa corrotta che dentro v'era, divenne bellissimo e odorifero molto.
>
> (Fostered with such constant, unremitting care, and nourished by the richness given to the soil by the decaying head that lay therein, the basil burgeoned out in exceeding great beauty and fragrance.)

When her brothers seize the pot, the object of their sister's devotions, they recognize the head of the dead man enclosed in the pot's earth through his still-luxuriant curls. They bury the head, and the girl pines away unto death from its loss. This tale is also related to the later ballad *Clerk Saunders*, an English example

[74] *Il Decameron di Messer Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. by V. Branca, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), I, 347; *The Decameron*, trans. by J. M. Rigg, 2 vols (London: privately printed for the Navarre Society, 1921), I, 298.

of an international folk tale, where a host of recriminatory brothers murder their sister's lover, taken *in flagrante*, who then returns to haunt her.

In offering a loose reformulation of these sentimental tropes *Squire* expands on the narrative possibilities of this morbid vision of love (or tender loving care, as it were), in a rhetorically accomplished and mimetically faithful account of the practices of medieval aristocratic embalmment, which we have discussed above. In what, were one to look for logic in the narrative, could seem rather demanding physical labour for a princess, she disembowels the corpse, provides his viscera with their own consecrated burial, but retains the body for herself. Disembowelled, she packs the body with spices and coats it in wax (presumably having already been clothed in its cerements), all verifiable features of medieval embalming. Enclosing his maplewood coffin in a marble sepulchre, she effectively creates a shrine for her own literalized romance *cor seint*. Yet the details of her adoration of this object or body are ambiguous — it is not the exterior of the marble shrine she seemingly kisses, but the mummified corpse itself: 'Soone at morne, whan she uprose, | Unto that dead body she gose, | [...] And kysse that body twyse or thryse' (ll. 695–96, 99). Conceivably, she opens the casket to view and kiss the corpse she has gone to so great lengths to conserve — but this of course is no way to preserve the body: it opens it to corruption. Her ritual is spiritually completed by her offering of five masses for the deceased's soul (l. 703). Yet she keeps the beneficiary of her masses a secret, as she has not bequeathed the body itself to the care of the church: it stays in her room. This bizarre rite persists until the seven-year 'trial-period' of romance has elapsed. Her temporary (but inadequate) enshrinement of her supposed beloved prolongs the Steward's physical, disruptive existence, and marks a descriptive and narrative hiatus in the romance — one of many extended, elaborate descriptive sequences in the poem, which defer the romance's obvious ending. Ultimately the Steward's corpse disintegrates in the face of the Princess's ardour. Where the Princess's posture of inordinate grief might prompt supernatural apprehension of the dead Squire's return from the dead to call a halt to his beloved's lamentation, it does — but in a wholly mundane, predictable, and realistic manner — the Squire returns not from the dead, but from his seven-year grand tour, precisely at the moment the remains of the imposter steward are shown to be false relics, monuments to presumed death only.

The use of this theme of the dead in the bedchamber, always liable to be used in didactic contexts, anticipates the Princess's long apostrophe against the world's joys. This passage is her farewell to the flesh, prefaced by a lament for the failure (corruption) of the Steward's own embalmed flesh, which unlike the vigorous

squire, has not weathered the seven-year trial well: the body has become reduced to dust:

> Unto that body she said tho,
> 'Alas that we should parte in two!'
> [...]
> 'I have thee kept this seven yere;
> And now ye be in powder small,
> I may no lenger holde you with all
> My love, to the earth I shall thee bringe
> And preestes for you to reade and singe.'
> (ll. 925–26, 930–34)

She can no longer perform her adoring memorial of the body if she cannot embrace more than mere handfuls of dust. Destined at last for committal to burial in the church, the body becomes an explicit *memento mori* for the Princess, a repudiation of vanity which has ironically overwhelmed its own state of cosmetic conservation. She describes it as her *treasure* (a term often applied to the contents of saints' reliquaries) to be held in preference to all other worldly goods and kept from imagined relic thieves:

> If any man aske me what I have here,
> I will say it is my treasure.
> If any man ask me why I do so,
> 'For no theves shal come therto';
> And, squire, for the love of thee,
> Fy on this worldes vanité!
> Farewell, golde, pure and fine;
> Farewell velvet and satine;
> Farewell castelles and maners also;
> (ll. 935–43)

She goes on to enumerate the follies of the world, in a near *ubi sunt* mode; a catalogue to repudiate an earlier catalogue of the delights of the world, a list of pleasures which her father had proposed to her as the means to best put aside morning for the dead (ll. 740–854).

But all things turn for the best, as they do in romance; resolution comes with the appropriate payment of time, time marked only by the decay of the Steward while the lovers retain all youth and beauty. The Squire's social mobility and success is matched by the grotesque stagnation and putrefaction of his rival. The

young man returns, and both he and the Princess's father are convinced by her demonstrated fidelity to the Squire (in the corpse).

It is tempting to find in all this a commentary on the putatively moribund narrative resources of late chivalric romance. We could choose to read the Princess's desperate attempts to hold on to a crumbling body as the anonymous poet's satire on the exhaustion and decay of traditional romance formulae. The Princess's vocal renunciation of the pleasures of the world in this reading becomes a self-conscious swansong to romance and its formulae. But all this would imply a poet self-consciously designating himself as a kind of undertaker to a defunct genre. I would prefer to suggest the imaginative use of motifs, revolving around death and stagnation, instead imply a view of romance narrative as an effortlessly renewable genre. Despite the text's ludic foregrounding of death, this is a narrative (as all romances are), of the hero's comic resurrection. This gesture admittedly confirms the text's generic predictability, but also its indestructibility as a genre that can continually engage its audiences despite overfamiliarity. Death and resurrection, narrative stagnation and invention are perfectly balanced in *The Squire of Low Degree*. Despite the effects of time, romance goes on, in a macabre testament to, and parody of, the fidelity of the loving pair amid the marathon separations of romance. Love transcends death and separation in the most grotesquely visible and predictably reassuring way in *The Squire of Low Degree.* Despite its dwelling on the trappings of *contemptus mundi* and mortality, it ensures that its genre is never the object of our rejection as readers.

In our reading of *Squire*, licensed necrophilia inflects the use of the dead for burlesque ends, and in *An Alphabet of Tales* conserves the tale's didactic register in an antifeminist as well as a *contemptus mundi* mode. In *Squire* it is the banality of the corpse which highlights the wrong- or right-headedness of this narrative's protagonists. Both texts are examples based wholly on the manner in which the corpse can be exploited as a transgressive interdiction to sexual licence in young men or unmarried girls, by turns earnest or admonitory. Both examples are indeed *invitations* to necrophilia which are declined; the living do not couple with the dead here. By the same token, supernatural apprehension has no place in these examples, but it is to the consummation of desire, as it were, in the coupling of the living and dead that we now turn. In this next example we see a use of the body as a site of marvels and supernatural horror in its own right as well as an instruction in sexual abatement. This occurs in another widely disseminated text of international character, *Mandeville's Travels* (an itinerary and story collection concerning the pilgrimage routes to Jerusalem) which contains, in all its versions, a brief account of the living coupling with the dead. It is, indeed the gratification

of the desire of the living for the desirable dead, an idea which we began this section with, an act to be interdicted after the event by supernatural horrors. In a narrative conceived as a local legend from the region around the 'Gulfe of Cathaly' (on the passage from Cyprus to Jerusalem), we are told of a country tainted by the actions of a young man, who

> hadde a fayr leman [lover], the whiche that he louede meche, and she deyed sodeynly from hym and was leyd in a fayr tombe of marbyl. And for the grete loue and longynge that he hadde to that woman, he yede vpon a nyght to here tombe and lay by here, and sperid the graue as it was before and wente his way.[75]
>
> (had a fair lover, whom he much loved, and she died on him, and was laid in in a fair tomb of marble. And because of the great love and longing that he had for the woman, he went upon a night and lay by her, and restored the grave as it was and went his way.)

A year later (or in some versions of the *Travels*, the nine months appropriate to parturition), a disembodied voice commands him to go to the grave on pain of death and see what it is he has begotten there. Opening it, there flies 'out the graue as it wer the hed of a forschapyn [mishappen] beste, foul and hedous'. This 'gorgon-head' portends the eventual deluge and submergence of the city, which soon ensues.

This tale, based on classical legends, is believed to have entered European tale collections after its introduction from the East by returning crusaders. It appeared ultimately not only in Mandeville but in the earlier Latinate chronicles and collections of *curiose* of Gervase of Tilbury, Walter Map, Benedict of Peterborough and Roger Hoveden.[76] The shocking fruit of the tomb, and also of the womb of the dead woman, is a parasite of the grave writ large. Such a creature is the fabulous consequence of medieval anxieties concerning the hidden processes of decay within the tomb, and of the lifelike properties of vitality residing in the dead post-mortem. It was believed that the parasites of the grave were *born* in the biological 'soup' resulting from the corruption of bodies and that worms and other parasites were bred not by animal semen, but of the humid processes of mortal rot. Thomas Aquinas held that 'the production of a new being requires only the *pneuma*, heat and humidity: that is why we see living animals born of fermenting or putrefying bodies'.[77] The sermonist known as Pseudo-Augustine

[75] *Bodley Version of Mandeville's Travels*, ed. by M. C. Seymour, EETS, o.s., 253 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 21.

[76] *Bodley Version*, ed. by Seymour, p. 153 n. 22.

[77] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 178.

held that toads derived from the brains, snakes from the loins, and worms from the intestines of dead people. Both he and Aquinas would have found this idea classically authorized by Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, which describes how snakes can be spontaneously bred in the marrow of the human spine: 'Anguem ex medulla hominis spinae gigni accepimus a multis' (We are given from many sources how serpents are born in the spinal marrow of humans).[78] Similarly, Isidore of Seville, citing Ovid, tells of how dragons (as in Mandeville) were held to be a by-product of decomposition; worms known as *sinciput* were believed to be generated in the brains of the dead, which after a week became flies and after a fortnight dragons.[79]

In Mandeville's tale, human seed added to the already-present generative properties of decay in the woman's corpse produces a prodigious birth of the tomb. This idea, in some vernacular lyrics of mortality, can belie the idea of decay, as in the remarkable (and noticeably under-anthologized) lyric 'My leeve liif that lyvest in welthe' unique to a fifteenth-century manuscript of Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* (a text that contains spiritual guidance on how to die) in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 789, of which only four lines may be adduced:

> In my riggeoon bredeth an addir kene,
> Min eiyen dasewyn swathe dymme:
> Mi guttis rotin, myn heer is grene,
> Mi teeth grennen swythe grymme.[80]
>
> (In my spine breeds an adder keen
> Mine eyes decay and grow dim
> My guts rot, my hair's green
> My teeth grin most grimly!)

Tombs teeming with life fascinated medieval thinkers, and we can easily see here a rationalizing impulse to uncover the hidden horrors of the tomb in a mode reflective of human curiosity, as well as didacticism. Yet what for us is 'science' and to medieval scholars 'natural philosophy' cannot be held apart from the moral gloss, as illustrated in a twelfth-century English manuscript, Cambridge, Trinity

[78] Cited in Oosterwijk, 'Food for Worms', p. 53; trans. in Pliny, *Natural History, with an English Translation*, III: *Libri VIII–XI*, ed. by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 353 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), bk X, chap. 86 (66), pp. 410–13.

[79] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 178.

[80] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, pp. 317–18.

College, MS 323. This book contains, in folio 4^{v}, the most laconic of lyrical vernacular expostulations — with its Latin equivalent — on human life in the grave:

> Cum sit gleba tibi turris
> Tuus puteus conclavis,
> Pellis et guttur album
> Erit cibus vermium.
> Quid habent tunc de proprio
> Hii monarchie lucro?
>
> (When the turuf is thy tower [*turf, i.e., earth*]
> and the pit is thy bower [*pit; i.e., grave*],
> thy wele and thy white throte skin
> schullen wormes tonote [*to-gnaw*].
> What helpeth thee then
> all the worulde winne [*Wealth/joy of the world*]?)

These lyrics are accompanied, on the preceding page (fol. 47^{r}), by 'scientific' verses in Latin and English on the beasts produced by the decomposing corpse, a combination which suggests a dual rational and affective impulse — in the one anthology — on the lively processes of the decaying body enclosed in the tomb.

Thus, in Mandeville, a monstrosity narrative that could be read, on the surface level, in the light of medieval natural philosophy, is silently glossed as a consequence of moral, and not merely physical decay. A private sin, the act of copulating with a fresh corpse, is implicitly read as a token worthy of damned cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah. Where pestilence could be feared to issue from cadavers, now the symbol of the Gorgon's head is the summation of all fears of fatal contagion — the city is ultimately destroyed in a moral, retributive 'plague' — a whole city pays the price of a citizen's infraction, implicitly denotative of depravity in the rest of his community. There is no prurient interest in the act of necrophilia or the state of the body. Nonetheless, this unelaborated act of necrophilia — a moral and physical monstrosity which results in the engendering of a literal monster — is enough to prompt a reader's abhorrence and, inseparably, fascination. It is perhaps interesting to consider how more macabre or fantastic responses, such as the corpse becoming pregnant and leaving the tomb to give birth, are eschewed. Walter Map's *De nugis curialium*, for instance, has more than one story where a wife recovered from the dead later gives birth (IV. 8).

From the earnest and admonitory and Mandeville, we return to ludic narratives of the dead — narratives that offer a tacit recognition, as well as a playful

undermining, of the idea of their latent menace to the living. Farce, burlesque, and natural curiosity all throw light onto the pliability of implied audience responses to the dead, to the 'use' of the dead — whether seen in the rhetorical wielding of the corpse to instructive ends or, within narrative, 'manhandling' of the corpse for narrative effect. We have already seen how farce is easily stimulated by indecorous manipulation of the body in *Squire*, where, if farcical, the Steward's corpse was nonetheless accorded full (if eroticized) Christian reverence in death and inhumation (however delayed). Improper disposal, and irreverence for the dead, nonetheless bears serious consequences in some tales. Tale XXV of the Harley text of the *Gesta Romanorum* , however, is no earnest injunction against the abuse of the dead, but rather narrates the farcical disposal of the bodies of three murder victims, exploiting to comic effect the superstitious assumptions of revenancy and sentience in the corpse.

In that staple arrangement of the *fabliau* genre, a young woman, married to an old man, induces her brother to dispose of the bodies of three men she has murdered for the money each of them had contracted to pay her for sexual intercourse, which she reneges on. As he is a night watchman, three would seem an excessive count of self-defence even to one as dimwitted as he, so she must persuade her brother that the three bodies are the one victim — on three separate occasions. Each time he disposes of a body she claims 'it' returns, forcing him to dispose of it 'again'. He remains comically oblivious to the notion he could be dumping three different corpses, and not one which has returned to haunt his sister thrice. The woman therefore exploits the unspoken fear that the dead will return to haunt the place of their death (a fear she is patently immune from). After her brother disposes of the first corpse, he returns to his sister's house, and she greets him with (feigned) grim news:

> 'O brother myn, helpe me now! The knyght, that thou castiste in to the water, is her a-yene [again]!' He trowid hir wordes, & entirid with hir into the chaumber & said 'how is this? I causte him into the see, & now he is her a-yene.' (p. 95)

Thus we have the disposal of two corpses. For the third, the sister must simulate horror in a manner a little more lively. As her brother returns she exclaims:

> 'Out! brother, out! for he is I-come ayene!' when he harde that, he mervayth [marvelled] strongly, trowing [thinking] ever that it had ben the first knyght. Than in anger he toke him, & put him in a sakke, & saide 'I caste thee first in the see, & sithen I founde the here ayene, aftir that I put a gret stone aboute thi necke, & yit thou rise.' (p. 96)

This exasperated speech on the brother's part could attest much to folk belief concerning the ability of the dead to 'rise', even in bodily form. He is nonetheless

sufficiently undaunted to admonish and manhandle the corpse with vigour, and he appears content enough to have to deal with a corpse that offers no argument, or resistance, even where it might be 'expected'. Certainly the sister at no stage expresses any apprehension that she might face justice from her dead victims — though she undoubtedly recognizes the anxiety sufficiently to exploit it to prompt her brother to her aid.

The woman's brother places the corpse on a bonfire and departs. In the meantime, a travelling knight chances upon the fire and, as it is a frosty day, decides to warm himself. The brother, returning, seeing the traveller, believes that the corpse has apparently reconstituted itself from cinders, together with his horse, and is warming himself by his own pyre: 'You are a devil [...] and yit I fynde the her with thin horse!' (p. 96). The brother casts the unfortunate knight, horse and all, into the flames. The other's stuttered protests as to his identity are the only occasion where the brother hears what he deems to be the corpse speaking. He is content to let the fire do its work properly for the second time.

The narrator makes no comment on the brother's attitude to, or any contemporary beliefs concerning revenants; circumstances here are so ludicrous as to put them beyond serious comment, it would seem, but this is not an aspect of style unique to this tale. As a whole, a detached narrative voice marks the *Gesta Romanorum's* tone, one which is content to deliver the tale and attach a clumsy allegorical gloss with equanimity. This concluding *moralité* constitutes the only way in which the haphazardly arranged tales of the collection are regularized. The story of the three corpses ends abruptly; the girl, brother, and old husband are hanged, after she lets slip a remark in public (and not through any workings of dead folk). The story is moralized, not as any kind of exemplum concerning murder and covetousness, or of respect for the dead, but as an allegory of the world (old man) wedded to the devil (woman), and of the soul which must burn in the ardour of faith.

Thus, setting the *moralité* to one side we have a macabre comedy of a slightly different kind if compared to *The Squire of Low Degree*. The *Gesta*'s tale suggests the worst fears of an audience inclined to belief in the unlicensed return of the dead, only to dismiss them in the most entertaining way. This, to be sure, is a mode of macabre not in any visual idiom, but one perfectly *imagined*: aligned more with a narrative aesthetic of the bizarre quite common to medieval comic tales. Put simply, revenancy in this narrative is comedy, and in a study where the literary dead are presented to the living, these laconic, ludic narratives cannot be forgotten in establishing a context for a range of audience responses to the imagined dead.

The Name of the Corpse: Macabre Nomenclature Revisited

A further burlesque sees the decayed body, still firmly the object of opprobrium but now rendered with a satirical cast, marking the transition from the inert figure of the dead body, the subject of Chapter 1, to the living-dead body: the revenant, the subject of Chapter 2. We have marked the relish with which the decay of the corpse could be adduced to the defence of the soul against vanity, a recurring theme in medieval monitory literature. One late adaptation of the theme sees the macabre corpse described and deployed as an object of detestation in a stylized flyting, or lyric disputation of poets, in *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, written sometime in the period 1490–1515, as a playful exercise between two Scots poets, William Dunbar and Walter Kennedy. We have already observed the impoverished lexicon with which the macabre body could be described in Middle English: 'the figure of deth' in the will of Edward IV. Dunbar provides a romance-inflected noun for the cadaver: *tramort* (*transi*). He also provides in the *Flyting*, as do two other anonymous fifteenth-century English works, *The Gast of Gy* and the Towneley Plays, a scripturally allusive name for the macabre mortal body: Lazarus.[81]

Lazarus was the most famous corpse in the Middle Ages, one apposite to citation in the macabre idiom, as in Scripture he was explicitly described as a putrefying corpse, to the distress of his mourners in the Gospel of John, 11. 39: 'ait Iesus tollite lapidem dicit ei Martha soror eius qui mortuus fuerat Domine iam fetet quadriduanus enim est' (Jesus saith: 'Take away the stone'. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith to him: 'Lord, by this time he stinketh, for he is now of four days'). Later medieval iconographic representations of this scene frequently (if not always) represent Lazarus's mourners covering their noses as they look upon the implicitly malodorous corpse. Lazarus effectively becomes a byword for the moribund corpse in medieval writing. Furthermore, the medieval 'Lazarus' was a conflation of the two New Testament figures of that name, Lazarus the leprous beggar at the table of Dives, and Lazarus of Bethany whom Jesus raised to life. The story of Dives and Lazarus from the Gospel of Luke (16. 19–31) was itself long associated with the dead and their fate. In referring to Abraham's bosom as a place of the dead, it impelled medieval tales of Purgatory. The Towneley Play of *Lazarus* gives its audience a Lazarus in the form of macabre corpse who describes his own irreversible decay from first-person experience, an

[81] *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, in *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 76–96.

episode which we will discuss later (below, Chapter 7). The romance text of *Sir Amadace*, which we will read below, with a particular interest in corruption, suggests too a knowing invocation of the narrative of Lazarus, resurrected by Christ even after he was starting to go 'bad'. The text, as we will see, implicitly promotes the body's transformation in death and resurrection as emblematic of the romance pattern of loss and recovery.

Dunbar's text caricatures his opponent in his flyting match, the poet Walter Kennedy, amid a tirade of bewilderingly obscene invective, as a corpse and a beggar. The name Lazarus encapsulates both attributes, as we have seen. The dominant theme running through Dunbar's tirade is his traducing of 'Kennedy' as a beggar — cruel language for a bardic poet who must resort to the kindness of patrons (ll. 130–36). The use, then, of the cadaver-Lazarus to complement the leprous beggar-Lazarus is an appropriately logical whimsy. The rhetoric of vile bodies has been anticipated at this point too by Dunbar's earlier comparison of Kennedy with the withered corpses of Danish pirates as they would have appeared on a gibbet. Thus, he is 'Evill farit [wretched] and dryit [dessicated] as Densmen on the rattis [wheels]' (l. 51), and he looks too as if kites had dined on his nose (l. 52). Thus we have corpses wielded as the acme of physical and emotional detestation, a psychological response readily appreciable in the public execution and display of criminals and their dead bodies in pre-modern societies. This is a body to provoke, in a familiar mode, rank opprobrium, not fear or empathy, modes we have witnessed elsewhere. Here however, moral interpretative registers as witnessed in the homiletic mode are set aside for the decidedly insulting.

The use of the defiled body as a measure of invective scales new heights as Dunbar introduces his macabre Lazarus simile, the more to intensify the portrayal of his opponent's constantly cited, monstrous 'frawart phisnomy' (l. 81). Therefore, Kennedy is not merely a carrion-crow (l. 101), a leek (l. 102), an old nag (l. 185), a diarrhoeic cormorant (l. 194), but firmly 'corrupt carrioun' (l. 139), 'Restit [smoke-dried] and crynit [withered] as a hangitman on hill' (l. 187). In an ecstasy of macabre invective, Dunbar addresses Kennedy:

> 'Thow Lazarus, thow laithly lene tramort
> To all the warld thow may example be
> To luk upon thy grislie piteous port'
> For hiddowis, haw and holkit is thyne ee,
> Thy cheikbane bair and blaiknit is thy ble.
> Thy choip, thy choll, garris men forto leif chest,
> Thy gane, it garris us think we mon de.
> I conjure the, thow hungert Heland gaist!

The larbar linkis of thy lang lenye craig,
Thy pure pynit throtт, peilit and owt of ply,
'Thy skolderit skin, hewed like ane saffrone bag,
Garris men dipyt thar flesche, thow spreit of Guy.'
(ll. 161–72)

Thou Lazarus, thou loathly lean corpse,
To all the world you may example be
To look upon your grisly hideous face
For hideous, livid, and hollow is your eye,
Your cheekbone bare, and blackened your complexion.
Your jaw and jowl spurs men to live chaste,
Your visage it reminds us that we must die!
I conjure thee, emaciated Highland ghost!
The feeble joints of your long neck
Your scrawny throat, skin peeled and saggy,
Your distempered skin, coloured like a sack of saffron,
Makes men despise their flesh, thou Ghost of Guy!

This passage parodies both the language of *contemptus mundi* and the interpretation of its signs: Kennedy is so hideous, he reminds us of our mortality; he is ugly enough to be a *memento mori*.[82] Lofty rhetoric, but rhetoric wielded here as the opprobrium of the schoolyard, in a sequence of tit-for-tat insults, so that the language of spiritual health is wielded now not for anyone's moral welfare, but instead defamation.

Dunbar expertly inventories the physical attributes of a decaying corpse, yielding, in a rhetorically accomplished, macabre blazon, a figure that perfectly fulfils the *desiderata* of the body in the *contemptus mundi* tradition — and as attributes common to beggar, leper, and corpse. We see that Kennedy bears a corpse's emaciated frame, the 'withered' aspect borne by the corpse once gaseous distension has ceased and mummification set in. Turning to the face of the Lazarus, pitted by hollow sockets, we note his skin blackened by the mould of decay and the settling of blood; we see his cheekbone exposed, free of the flesh that is abandoning the body. The corpse's implicitly exposed mandible forgoes further description, merely adding to a litany of attributes that makes men desire

[82] Similarly, other passages comically exploit the extravagant language of visions of the Otherworld and of the Apocalypse, as Priscilla Bawcutt observes in her edition of this text in William Dunbar, *Selected Poems* (Harlow: Longmans, 1996), p. 416.

to 'live chaste': for how, in this mock-earnest homiletic mode, we are reminded, can anyone kiss knowing that such a jaw lies under their flesh? The whole disfigured face makes men 'think they shall die' — such is indeed the conceived purpose of the macabre idiom and the culture of *contemptus mundi*, but it is here, as we have observed, reconfigured as contempt for one man in particular.

Still, the Kennedy figure is not just an inert corpse, but a living Lazarus, a dead man animated: a 'Highland' ghost to boot, pejoratively so in the mouth of Lowland Dunbar (Walter Kennedy was indeed an Ayrshire highlander). As a ghost he is to be *conjured* — spiritually compelled to make a response to Dunbar's flyting. Yet we are not done with this sequence of physical description. His ravaged neck, throat, and saffron-coloured, putrescent skin make all men despise their own flesh. He is, finally, invoked as the Ghost of Guy, the most famous ghost of the late Middle Ages. Dunbar's 'Guy' appears, contrary to his original literary conception, as a visible, solid manifestation, and is therefore a macabre spirit, substantiated with the linguistic baggage of a feculent corpse (on *The Gast of Gy*, see below, Chapter 2). Similarly, where 'Lazarus' here is uttered merely an index of opprobrium (and recognition), elsewhere, this figure is lent self-objectivity and voice as a reminder of death through his own spoken testimony in the Towneley Play of *The Raising of Lazarus*, where he solemnly intones for his audience the physical reality of death as a sermon come to life, just like *The Three Dead* (see below, Chapter 7, for a fuller discussion of these episodes).[83] With Dunbar, the objectified corpse begins to assume life under the sheer intertextual weight of invective. The figure's manipulation as a burlesque trope indicates a ubiquitous familiarity with the macabre idiom of art and writing by the end of the fifteenth century, interacting with new and old mannerisms of presenting the dead — the scriptural Lazarus, and the 'modern' Guy. Here, then, we see the macabre *tramort* — the *transi*, fused with other morbid tropes. Kennedy is the very figure of Lazarus himself, who did not experience corruption beyond four days, fused with the Ghost of Guy, who emphatically had no body to witness corruption. Lazarus should not resemble the cadavers of the *Danse Macabre* or *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* — yet in this reading he does. In Dunbar's poetic process the idea of the macabre synthesizes themes which have hitherto registered only as morbid. Dunbar wields the macabre as an accentuating gesture, to lend astringency to the excoriative process undertaken in *Flytyng*. Making the Kennedy

[83] *The Raising of Lazarus*, in *The Towneley Plays*, ed. by Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, EETS, s.s., 13, 14, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), I, 425–31. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit,* p. 487.

figure a specifically *macabre* Guy, a *macabre* Lazarus as well as a loathly *tramort* makes him a more emphatic object of detestation — a measure readily comprehended alongside the rank obscenity of such lines as 'Wan waraiglane wasp, ma wormis hes thow beschittin | Nor thair is gers on grund or leif on lind' (ll. 195–96) (Wan wriggling wasp, you've be-shat more worms than there is gorse on ground or leaf on branch).

The macabre idiom, in this reading, has become part of the medieval lexicon of the grotesque. Though the body still remains the locus of anxiety for the onlooker, it becomes, in the hands of a poetically exuberant user of the imagery of execration, a striking medium of destructive imagery, analogous to the use of dead bodies as missiles in medieval sieges. Dunbar hurls the image of the corpse at his opponent with *stylized* ferocity, yet in other contexts he earnestly laments that Walter Kennedy is at death's door, soon to join the dead authors of Britain in his *Lament for the Makers* (ll. 89–91).[84] Yet, amid the *Flytng*, he is not so keen to have the macabre Lazarus applied as insult against himself, seemingly, in Kennedy's subsequent reply (ll. 249–550). Dunbar writes for Kennedy's rebuttal against himself a pungent catalogue of invective and refutation — the Dunbar figure is a traitor from a line of traitors, a devil, a Lollard — but not for him the comparison to the cadaver Lazarus.

The anonymous late fourteenth-century English tail-rhyme romance *Sir Amadace* implicitly deploys the iconographic posture of the living in the presence of the decaying Lazarus. This image of decay serves as a symbol of the text's main concern: the alignment of ideas of death and debt, and in a romance mode, their mutual impermanence, an impermanence seen when the corrupt body of the dead man is later transformed into a quasi-angelic knight in white. Let us summarize the story: Amadace, a generous but impoverished knight on an atypical knightly quest — fleeing from his creditors — chances upon a foul-smelling cadaver. It is the body of a man so in debt his widow has been prevented by a creditor from committing him to burial for the past sixteen weeks — a prodigious term of non-internment which must generate a degree of decay seldom to be witnessed or smelt, as Amadace's squire relates emphatically upon investigating the scene:

> Suche a stinke as I had thare,
> Sertis [*for sure*] thenne had I nevyr are [*I've never encountered its like*]
> Noquere in so stid [*Nowhere, anywhere*].
> For this palfray that I on ryde [*by the horse I'm riding on*],

[84] *Lament for the Makers*, in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Bawcutt, pp. 105–10.

Ther myghte I no lengur abide [*I couldn't have lingered there*];
I traue I have keghte my dede [*I'd say I'd have caught my death*].[85]

The description of the stench of a long-decaying cadaver and an onlooker's recoil periphrastically realizes the scriptural and iconographic posture of a decaying Lazarus. Stopping 'his nase with his hude' (l. 73), the Squire adopts the manner of the mourners of the dead Lazarus who desperately cover their faces as they look upon the corpse in later medieval iconography. The text of *Amadace* portrays decay as a function of smell, not sight, unlike other romances concerned with death such as *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (see below, Chapter 5) or even *The Squire of Low Degree* (above) which yield florid descriptions of the appearance of the corrupt body.

The thematic concerns of *Amadace* — the familiar romance tropes of loss and recovery — find emblematization in the corpse, and in its natural and supernatural fates. The corrupt body implicitly denotes destitution and its human consequences; the body transformed and resurrected signals worldly recovery (and its fairy-tale like improbability). The text of *Sir Amadace* is in part an exploration of the consequences of the body's transformation in death, as an extension of the misery germane to man, echoing familiar prescriptions such as found in an English lyric from Friar John of Grimestone's fourteenth-century preaching book, which exhorts us to look upon the dead body and see what we will become:

Behold nou, man, quat thu salt be
That al this werd nou drawith to the.
A foul caronighe on the to se
That schinest nou so fair in ble.[86]

(Behold now man what thou shalt be
what all this world holds for you:
a foul carrion for you to see,
(you) who shines now so fair of face.)

At least Amadace's corpse will once more shine in complexion. *Sir Amadace* inverts the habitual physical transformations of death, becoming the tale of how 'foul carrion' later 'shines' in appearance, transfigured by a supernatural licence

[85] *Sir Amadace*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. by Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973), pp. 169–92 (ll. 91–96).

[86] *Descriptive Index of the English Lyrics of John of Grimestone's Preaching Book*, ed. by Edward Wilson, Medium Aevum Monographs New Series, 2 (Oxford: Edward Wilson, 1973), p. 60; my translation.

ultimately confirmed as divine grace; romance providence. Yet at first this body is a sight, a manifest macabre transformation from which there seemingly can be no recovery. The dead man has been accompanied for the sixteen weeks of his repose by his widow, who will not leave his side until he can be buried. This posture of defiant attachment felt by the bereaved for the long-dead, decayed corpses of their beloved is a familiar motif, seen above with *The Squire of Low Degree*, and examples from the *Gesta Romanorum*. This scene from *Sir Amadace* certainly belongs with the foregoing discussion of the emotional embrace of the physicality of death, yet in this text, we are not dealing with a mere corpse, but with what subsequently becomes one of the most distinctive ghosts in the corpus of English romance. The widow remains bound to her husband despite his physical ruination, one that repels all others. Yet it is the pathetic sight of the man's mortal body which provokes an almost lyrical degree of introspection in the character of Amadace, a formulation which parallels the affective processes of the Middle English lyrics of mortality, as in this example from BL, MS Harley 2316, from the second half of the fourteenth century:

> Kindely is now my coming,
> Into this world with teres and cry [*By nature is my birth in tears and woe*]
> Litel and poure is my having
> Britel and sone ifalle from hi [*meagre my wealth, brittle, soon lost*]
> Scharp and strong is my deying [*bitter and brutal my dying*]
> I ne woth whider schal I [*and where I go then I don't know*]:
> Foul and stinkande is my roting.
> On me, Jhesu, you have mercy!

Amadace identifies empathically with the dead man's ruinous, but well-intentioned profligacy: the dead man was just as generous as Amadace habitually is. The corpse becomes a mirror and *memento mori* for those in debt, and for the improvidently generous. Amadace, heedless of this mirror's ostensive warning, expends the last of his wealth to ensure the man's burial, thus paradoxically increasing the likelihood of a similarly ignominious end for himself. Amadace will, as a hero of romance, follow this fallen hero of generosity to the same conclusion, in the spirit of chivalric brotherhood:

> Unnethe he myghte forgoe to wepe,
> For his dedus him sore forthoghte;
> Sayd, 'Yondur mon that lise yondur chapell withinne,
> He myghte full wele be of my kynne,
> For ryghte so have I wroghte.'
>
> (ll. 206–10)

(Scarcely he might forgo to weep,
But thought on his deeds;
'That man that lies in that chapel
Could well be of my own kin;
For I've done just as he has.')

Amadace, himself a generous spendthrift, speaks explicitly of a kinlike affinity between himself and the corpse, and it is this utterance that implicitly binds the dead man to Amadace so that he is compelled later to return from death as his benefactor, and brother in charitable profligacy — an exemplification of the propensity of ghosts in traditional narrative to appear to those close to them either to warn them or to render thanks. This is the theme popularized (if not originated) by Gordon Gerould as 'The Grateful Dead' in his titular study of folklore published in 1908.[87]

Amadace thus pays for the cadaver's entombment and his outstanding debts with the last of his wealth (ll. 265–85). The romance's dénouement later makes clear what an incalculable relief this impulsive act of Christian charity and chivalric generosity represents to the dead man.[88] It is at this point, however, that Amadace reaches the nadir of his fortunes. Penniless, and with the last of his retinue (generously) dismissed, Amadace is left bewildered amid a forest with not a *living* soul in sight, aptly primed for an incursion of the supernatural in any mode of romance. Amadace is now on the cusp of questioning a Providence which leaves generosity so punished. In tacit response, the revenant of the buried man, his true identity as yet unrevealed either to the audience or to Amadace, appears without warning in the form of a knight all in white:

So come a mon ryding him bye,
And speke on him fulle hastely,
Therof he was afryghte.
Milke quyte was his stede,
And so was all his othir wede —
Hade contiens of a knyghte.
(ll. 436–41)

[87] Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Grateful Dead: The History of a Folk Story* (London: Nutt, 1908; repr. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. vii.

[88] Elizabeth Williams, '*Sir Amadace* and the Undisenchanted Bride: The Relation of the Middle English Romance to the Folktale Tradition of 'The Grateful Dead', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. by Rosalind Field (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), pp. 57–70 (pp. 60–63).

(So a man came riding by him
And spoke to him promptly,
Frightening him.
Milk-white was his steed
And so were all his other weeds.
He had all the bearing of a knight.)

Yet the narrative permits here no such simple transaction between the two as mere payment for charity rendered, deliberately postponing any speedy, symmetrical resolution as in the exemplum mode in favour of an extended, more ambiguously developed plot. The ghost/White Knight at this point admits no debt to Amadace, himself adopting rather the posture of a nameless benefactor to a hopeless man, counselling Amadace, 'Repente the noghte that thu hase done, | For He that schope bothe sunne and mone, | Full wele may pay for alle' (ll. 466–68) (Repent not of what you done, for he that shaped both Sun and Moon may pay for all). In this world, Providence will pick up the tab for unrestrained generosity, an apt universe for a hero, Amadace, who has always given without counting the cost. Yet in spite of this seeming Christian consolation in despair (trust in God), the White Knight soon appears to be more aligned with more anomalous, supernatural forces, and, in a manner altogether un-Christian, demands that as payment for his aid, Amadace give him half of whatever wealth he regains, when asked (ll. 502–04). If an agent of benign providence, this one will have teeth; he will punish profligacy as much as reward generosity.

The ghost's gift — essentially directions to a rich shipwreck — is nothing less than a typical romance itinerary toward regained fortune, yet one bizarrely, and morbidly, inflected in its narrative logic. Reaching the shore strewn with the wealth of a wrecked sea vessel and its dead company, Amadace strips the bodies of their wealth, forgetting any duty towards charitable burial. Here, it seems, the dead passively offer up their riches in vicarious gratitude for his actions towards one of their number. Newly caparisoned, with a new identity in a new land as a foreign, shipwrecked knight, he is adopted as son and heir by the stock benign elderly monarch, whose daughter Amadace marries, having won her in tournament. Upon the birth of their child, the White Knight returns to claim his debt, demanding nothing other than a half-share of Amadace's bride and child, which, as we might expect, is a sharing possible only through dismemberment with a sword, and not any notional *ménage a trois*.

The ghost's terrifying demands for their dismemberment are rendered with a keen eye for the pathetic on the part of the poet. The court swoons in horror (l. 785), and Amadace's generous greetings of the knight whom he has named

a brother (directly paralleling his earlier admittance of kinship with the corpse) are all spurned by the implacable figure in white (l. 755). Amadace's bride, in a Constance/Griselda posture familiar to 'homiletic' romance, accepts the White Knight's demands for her death and her child's. She would not see her husband default on his debts, saying:

> Take and parte me evun in toe [*take and cut me in two*],
> Thu [thou] wan [won] me and I am thine.
> Goddus fobotte [God forbid] that ye hade wyvut [*wived*],
> That I schuld yo a lure makette [*only to become a lure to you*]
> Yore wurschip in londe to tyne [*to lose your reputation*]!
>
> (ll. 764–68)

No more running away from debts for Sir Amadace. The White Knight seems here to become a representative of every man Amadace hasn't paid, come to claim repayment. In a final seeming gesture of bloodthirstiness, he forces Amadace to take his own sword and execute the blow (ll. 778–80). As he prepares to strike, the ghost commands 'Cese!' (l. 801). Here, in a manner akin to that of Bertilak's self-unmasking before Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (as many have noted), the White Knight retrospectively identifies himself as the corpse on the bier. This is an identification necessitated in part by verisimilitude; the corpse would have been so corrupt in death that its actual living countenance could not to be recognized in the restored, transfigurative form implicit in the White Knight's appearance. The hitherto terrifying ghost's tone at once softens, and his words, though sufficiently ambiguous to make interpretation difficult, are paraphrased here: 'I know you (Amadace) to be a noble man, and so I am not surprised if you would have shirked this blow — yet I was just as glad (as you are now having been spared the death of your wife) when you took and buried my bones with everything you had.'

> He sayd, 'I con notte wite the gif thu were woe,
> Suche a ladi for to slo,
> Thi wurschip thus wold save.
> Yette I was largely as gladde,
> Quen thu gafe all that evyr thu hade,
> My bones for to grave.
>
> (ll. 805–10)

Even as a corpse, lying in repose, he was fully aware of Amadace's charity, in an anomalous post-mortem existence that makes no reference to Purgatory, but only a nightmarish, post-mortem endurance of the threat of predation by scavengers;

as 'howundus mete' (if not worms' meat). Averting, with Amadace's charitable burial a post-mortem destiny as dog food, he has avoided ordeal which morbidly rewrites the sense of being torn to pieces by your creditors:

> In a chapell quere I lay to howundus mete,
> Thu payut furst thritty powund by grete,
> Sethun all that thu myghtus have.
> Ther I besoghte God schuld kevyr the of thi care,
> That for me hade made the so bare,
> Mi wurschip in lond to save.
> (ll. 811–16)
>
> (In a chapel where I lay as hounds' meat
> You paid first forty pounds on demand
> And then everything you had.
> Thereafter I begged God that he might alleviate your cares
> You, who had, for my sake, made yourself so bare.)

The ghost's test becomes a parting gift to the man he has gratefully duly restored to wealth. In added payment, he bestows on Amadace a sense of just how relieved he felt in receiving a burial he thought would be denied him forever, a relief Amadace could never otherwise comprehend in his new state of unassailable wealth. Only, it seems, the torment and subsequent relief of seeing his family spared from death can approach the ghost's in intensity.[89] Yet the ghost's dual reward and punishment of Amadace is an intrinsic part of Amadace's education as a hero. Just as the dead man's generosity was ultimately punished with non-burial in the ultimate configuration of the social ostracism of poverty, so too will Amadace be punished temporarily for his career of giving and not counting the cost; punished in the abortive execution of his wife and child, where we understand a second implied mirror for Amadace of the consequences of unbridled generosity. With the prospect of dead wife and son, a cruel metaphor emerges of a very bourgeois fear of ever sinking so low as to leave your family destitute. Implicitly Amadace's 'heroic' career has been one of induction to the responsibilities of matrimony and social achievement. His days of not counting the cost are over: from now on, the material consequences of improvidence fall first on his family.

[89] Elizabeth Williams, '*Sir Amadace*', pp. 66–67, argues that the poet was attempting something along the lines of some Scandinavian analogues, which are far more explicit in denoting the torment inflicted and subsequent relief as a reward to enable the feeling of kinship.

Still, in a rendering distinctly redolent of the paramount desire of the dead for burial in classical literature, and of popular, superstitious apprehension of the dead, we are given a portrait of a dead man more concerned with the fate of his earthly remains than the spiritual destiny of his soul (a preoccupation that reflects the text's unflinching concern with the earthly accruing and maintenance of wealth). Ultimately, it is not devoted prayers which succour this spirit but the act of physical burial, very much in the manner of the pagan dead of classical literature. He walks the earth seemingly in physical form, yet in a manifestation also made intriguingly ambiguous, suggestive of spectrality — a visible incorporeality hinted at several times in the text, and by end of which the White Knight is seen to melt away as dew (l. 824). His whiteness may denote the pallor of death; yet its choice, in a manner similar to the use of green in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may suggest a more ineffable supernatural connotation, even an affiliation with the fairy realm, witnessed in other fourteenth-century English romances: the fairy denizens of the Otherworld in *Sir Orfeo* (see below, Chapter 3) are uniformly caparisoned in white, as is the angel-king of the romance *Robert of Sicily*. Indeed the angelic is one of the few possibilities left open to the text's audience in regarding the White Knight. The narrator of *Amadace* reflects their groping for an adequate frame of reference to comprehend the knight when he is described as 'come in als gay gere | right as he an angel were | Cladde he was in white' (ll. 637–39). Yet this is a whiteness imbued with less definite attributes of sanctity and more vaguely sinister overtones. Granted, an absence of description cannot be taken as a denial of a specific attribute. The narrator of *Amadace* shows a fondness for spare description; his unadorned representation of the White Knight complements the earlier lack of complex visual embellishment in the knight's dead corpse. As we have seen, stench, not elaborate, pictorially complex decay, is the counterpart to a transfigured whiteness.

The grateful dead of *Sir Amadace* combines attributes of the saintly dead, the angelic, and the fairy to denote a supernatural figure not to conform readily to any one interpretation of its nature among its audience. Yet the White Knight's ghostly attributes are unmistakable. He must be seen as a figure whose *other*-worldly nature derives solely from the fact of his having died. He is visibly unable to partake of the physical world he inhabits, suspiciously travelling without retinue (save, at the risk of demanding narrative logic which could never be forthcoming, a presumably supernatural horse), refusing all food and drink (ll. 702–05), and requiring also that Amadace himself deal the death blow, one he perhaps cannot exercise himself in his doubtful corporeality, though it is stated he aids Amadace's wife to her feet, presenting her to her husband once more in a

significant gesture of satisfaction (ll. 802–03). Aside from this movement, the ghost seemingly touches nothing.

It is an interesting feature of *Amadace* that such this death blow is not in fact firstly realized, then reversed with its victims raised from death, as we find in the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Amis and Amiloun*. Here a similar requirement (witnessed also in *Sir Amadace*'s closest romance analogue, the fifteenth-century French *Olivier de Castille*) necessitates the killing of Amis's children so that their blood can heal his blood-brother Amiloun of his leprosy. The children are shed, Amiloun healed by anointment with their blood, and released from the incipient divine curse by his friend's extreme sacrifice. As they go to bury them they find the children duly restored to life, the token of God's forgiveness (ll. 2290–2410). In *Sir Amadace*, too, the brotherly kinship of the living and the dead men is retained as the emotional core of the romance for its audience. The ghost's parting words would not have left a dry eye in the house: 'Fare wele now [...] mynne awne true fere [my own true brother]! For my lenging [abode] is no lengur her.' Thus only at the end does this fearsome ghost express his love and gratitude for the man who buried him as he would a brother (ll. 817–19). Yet, in a gesture that will always baffle readers, the ghost must take credit for Amadace's good fortune, and also thank him, in first tormenting him. We have alluded to one programme of logic above, but, as Elizabeth Williams too has pointed out, we are at the very least enjoined that to make unwise bargains (or in the folkloric mode, rash promises) with the dead will have unforeseen consequences, however good the outcome — therefore it is wise to treat the dead with caution, as capricious beings much in the manner of the faery folk of romance, as witnessed in the Middle English *Sir Launfal* or *Sir Orfeo*. At a minimum of analysis, the dead remain here, if nothing else, much to be feared.

In this chapter we have seen how the dead and decomposing body is fashioned and received in Middle English narrative in a manner often consistent with the iconographic portrayal of the body in the macabre idiom and the language of *contemptus mundi*. We have observed how the deployment of the inert dead cannot be wholly divorced from the concomitant suggestion of the latent threat of their return, and their implied sensitivity in death (and consequent gratitude) has been seen in *Sir Amadace*, where we have encountered an initial and extraordinary example of the return of the dead — not as body, not as spirit, but as a more indeterminate species of supernatural being. The dead in Middle English are by no means lent such ambiguity in the normal course of the exegesis of the doctrines of Purgatory and mortuary suffrage. It is thus to the post-mortem return of the dead to the living in Middle English, almost universally in exemplification of Christian eschatology, to which we therefore now turn.

And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger,
At whose approach ghosts, wand'ring here and there,
Troop home to churchyards; damnèd spirits all
That in cross-ways and floods have burial
Already to their wormy beds are gone.

—Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

But some man will say, how are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?

—1 Corinthians 15. 35

Chapter 2

The Progress of the Dead: From Body to Revenant

We have seen in Chapter 1 how the rhetorical emblazoning of the dead, and of the decomposition they undergo, postures inherited from the *contemptus mundi* tradition, instigate the macabre idea in its pictorial response to the dead. In a literary context we have witnessed, in a variety of contextual iterations, the reception of the inert, dead body. This chapter discusses the *revenant* — the return of the dead among the living as a further aspect of the literary negotiation of the macabre aesthetic in Middle English literature. In the following examples, the dead are shown not where the medieval dead should be — in Purgatory, Hell, or Heaven — but on (not in) the earth. It is to gauge the significance of this anomaly that we must address ourselves. Though most of the following accounts are expressly intended to induce awareness of the afterlife and of the consequences of 'the bad death' rather than of a desire to portray the dead themselves, there is an implicit sense of more primitive necrophobia exploited here by medieval writers as a rhetorical and narrative device. We will often see complex rhetorical description of the body eschewed, in favour of simpler verbal, gestural, and psychological modes of narration. What we will attempt to gauge, therefore, is less these narratives' mimetic (or macabre) effects in portraying the dead, as their emotional gestures; and how affective responses to the dead are encoded within their narratives as a model for the desired response of the audience.

The range of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Middle English texts discussed in the present chapter comprises examples from tale collections and longer didactic pieces, and includes texts by authors such as Lydgate and Chaucer. We begin with the formulation of the appearance and gestures of the dead in derivatives of *The Golden Legend*. Secondly, we will explore one commonplace

Christian rationalization of the animated dead — spiritual possession — in Mirk's *Festial*, and (though not in any sense a homiletic text) Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, with other short examples from the tale collections. This theme is considered before less theoretically specific narrative manifestations of 'wandering corpses' are assessed in the *Gesta Romanorum* and Lydgate's *Legend of St Austin at Compton*. Finally, we will read the alliterative miracle-narrative *St Erkenwald* as a poetically ambitious crafting of the appearance of the vocal corpse to an inquisitive audience — an artistry balanced by a studied intellectual curiosity and ambition in the narrative.

Medieval people regarded dying as a bodily transformation, but morbid introspection on the future decay of the body was for personal mortification, and not an acceptable part of the commemoration of the beloved dead, who could only be remembered as they appeared in life, and even in youth. Ostensibly, the macabre idiom was to be shunned for those who wished to preserve the memory of their dead. Yet the occurrence of cadaver tombs in late medieval England as well as the Continent would suggest the exact opposite impulse. Cadaver effigies (as we have already observed) would publicly and spectacularly obliterate 'living' memory in favour of a perpetually mortified image.

It was not, of course, merely the physical fate of the dead that troubled the bereaved, but the spiritual fate of the deceased. The need of the bereaved to comprehend the destination of their dead could be aided by concentrating on the thought of their spiritual, not physical, abode. It would have perhaps been intolerable to consider the beloved dead decaying in the tomb, in increasing increments of loathsomeness. Better instead to imagine them as spirits dwelling in the hereafter, which, for most Christians by the later Middle Ages would have been Purgatory. At its simplest, people were to understand (however much they could understand) that 'Oure Louerd fond furst purgatorie · men theron to wende | That here penance her an vrthe · ne broghte noght to ende' (our Lord first founded Purgatory for men to go to who had not completed their penance here on earth).[1] Purgatory was to be understood increasingly as the universal, interim destination for those who had died and those yet to die, awaiting judgement. As the historian Nancy Caciola summarizes:

[1] *The South English Legendary*, ed. by Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, EETS, o.s., 235, 236, 244, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1956–59) (hereafter *SEL*), II, 464, ll. 31–32 (translations mine).

> Intimacy between the living and the dead was possible because death was not envisaged as a full extinguishing of either body or spirit. In doctrinal terms, the body awaited resurrection even as it decayed, while the soul entered the realm of a tripartite afterlife.[2]

Yet the partition of the dead from the living upon their expiration was immediate; concretized even in the formulation of the Christian liturgy of the dead. The dead had to wait in the vestibule of the church at their own funeral mass as the liturgists said 'we do not communicate with the dead, since they do not answer us'.[3] As we have already remarked, many churchyards too had a separate gate for the dead to lie in repose before burial, the lychgate, where the odours of the corpse would not intrude upon the mourners in the church. Physical partition, necessitated by hygiene, was nonetheless offset increasingly with a more emphatic spiritual proximity between the living and the dead. With the twelfth-century sublimation of the hitherto vaguely formulated expiatory abode of the dead (often realized as the bosom of Abraham) into the newly prescribed, doctrinaire locus of Purgatory, the dead, paradoxically, could never fully leave the living, even though their separateness from the living from the moment of death unto judgement had never before been better defined. Purgatory was, according the late thirteenth-century *South English Legendary*, a physically distinct place, comprised of five separate elemental loci:

> Hit nis noght in o stede to alle men · ac in vyue hit is iwrite
> On is in the firmament · ther as the gret brennyng is
> Of fur that hath ther his stede · & of sonne also iwis
> Thother is in their aboue · ther as is the gostes fleoth
> That turmentieth hem night & day · & neuere in reste ne beoth
> The thridde is an vrthe among ous here · the furde in watere is
> The vyfte is vnder vrthe deope · biside helle iwis.[4]
>
> It is not in one place for all men, but in five, it is written.
> One is in the firmament where there is great burning
> Of fire that has there its place, and of the Sun, truly.
> The other is in the air above where the spirits fly
> Which torments them night and day, and never lets them rest
> The third is on earth among us here; the fourth in water is
> The fifth is under earth deep, beside Hell, truly.

[2] Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 7.

[3] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 27, citing Honorius Augustodiensis.

[4] *SEL*, II, 466, ll. 84–90.

We will see explicit confirmations of the licensing of terrestrial Purgatory in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (see below, Chapter 5) and codified in a mode of vernacular theology in *The Gast of Gy* (see below, Chapter 3). Clearly, earthly apparitions can be less problematic to the living and to Christian doctrine if earth can be a licensed zone of purgation. Whatever the precise place of Purgatory, each Christian was charged to pray not only for his own dead who resided there, but for All Souls too, who also waited for their release from Purgatory's prison. Yet Purgatory was very much a two-way exchange, beneficial to the living and the dead. If unseen, the dead were always with the living, with demands as exigent as that of the poor, as illustrated by John Mirk:

> Also almes-geuying helpeth moch hem. For as watyr quench-ethe fure yn oure syght, right soo almes-dede qwenchethe the fure that brenneth yn hor payne. And yf almes be don for hom that ben in blys, for thay haue no need therto, hit ys putt ynto the tresoure of holy chyrche, and at Goddys byddyng hit ys dalt among hom theras he asynet it. (*Festial*, p. 270)
>
> (Alms-giving helps them much also. For just as water quenches fire in our sight, right so alms-deeds quench the fire that burns in their pain. And if alms be done for them that are already in bliss who have no need of it, it is put into the treasury of Holy Church, and at God's bidding it is dealt among those to whom he assigns it.)

Exegetically equated with a banquet whose participants flourished according to the generosity of the food (prayers) bidden them by the living, Purgatory was continually emphasized not just as a banquet comprised of rich members but one replete with poorer ones — those who, just like the starving poor, were always with the living.[5] Indeed, spiritualized food metaphors were a device to appropriate pagan funeral practices involving the providing of funeral feasts in the presence of the dead.[6] Physical food, it is continually prescribed, is not for the Christian dead; they cannot be propitiated in this (pagan) way. Their hunger for prayer and relief is one of the defining and potentially unsettling characteristics of the dead in these narratives, but this spiritual sublimation of the appetites of the dead, beings traditionally demanding of appeasement in pagan thought, makes the human intimacy with the dead required of the Purgatory doctrine more acceptable to Christian doctrine, and supplants fear with empathy.

Prayer as food is the theme of one of the very earliest of Christian ghost tales, from Book IV, Chapter 57, of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* (that same text that offered the Middle Ages so many models of dialogues with the dead, including the

[5] For the banquet of Purgatory see the All Souls' sermon from *SEL*, II, 5–20.

[6] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 32.

Trental legend; see below, Chapter 4). This tale finds later transmission amid the late twelfth-century collection of Jacobus de Voragine — the *Legenda aurea* (*The Golden Legend*). It appears too, in its earliest English redaction, *The South English Legendary*, which we will now read. The exemplum is one of several for All Souls' Day, a section that comprises two types of exegetical visions of Purgatory. One is a miracle of a living man *thought* dead, another is constituted in three appearances of the dead to the living, and a macabre emptying of a graveyard prompted by prayer. The initial tale of the three individual appearances of the dead to the living immediately follows the citation of the metaphor of the banquet of Purgatory and demonstrates the existence of a terrestrial locus of purgation, preparing the audience for these several other visualizations of the dead by the living:

> A preost was while in a stede · that let him bathie ylome
> Pryueiliche in a stede · that no man negh him come
> So that ther com ofte a man · as hit were bi cas
> & seruede him suythe wel · he nuste ho hit was
> A day he mekede halibred · & this man bitok
> To mede for his swynche · ac he hit anon forsook .[7]

(A priest was once in a place where he could on occasion bathe privately where no man could approach him. Yet, by chance there came a man who attended on him diligently. He didn't know who it was. One day he made holy bread and offered it to this man for his labours, but he declined it.)

The attendant is a ghost, consigned to serve out a penance in the bathhouse in expiation of a carnal sin he committed in that place, which he left unconfessed in his lifetime. His repudiation of the offered bread is not attributable to any supposed lack of corporeity: indeed he seems to bear all the attributes of a living man, with none of those belonging to the dead; he is a living, breathing 'seli gost' (l. 120). It is rather his status as a soul out of grace that inhibits him from partaking of consecrated matter. The priest angrily conjures the dead man to confirm his non-demonic benignity, and he undertakes to sing a mass for the wretched soul, thus providing this hungry member of the dead the only food from which it can benefit. When he no longer appears to the priest, the dead man says, he will know that he has come out of Purgatory, and so it transpires after seven days. The *Legendary*'s narrator explicitly designates this tale an example of the tenure of an earthly Purgatory and quickly provides another illustrating the Purgatory of the sea. This is the tale of St Thibaut and the ice block containing the soul of a purgatorial spirit frozen in water, released after a Trental of masses. This

[7] *SEL*, II, 467, ll. 101–06.

exemplum, witnessed also in Mirk's *Festial* and *An Alphabet of Tales* is itself another tale descending from Gregory's *Dialogues*, and it was one of the first used in the Middle Ages to illustrate the efficacy of suffrages for the dead.

This variegation of the places of the dead is rehearsed in the later English redaction of *The Gast of Gy*, but reduced to two elements: 'common' Purgatory served in the Otherworld, and 'partable', or individual, Purgatory served out on earth (see below, Chapter 3). The appearance of the ordinary dead to the living could therefore be rationalized as part of the process and geography of their purgation, and they would often appear to the living as ordinarily as they would have appeared in life. Yet, as we will see, the need for prayer of the great corporate body of *unseen* and unseeable dead required demonstration in the most dramatic of tales also.

Literary exegesis of the dead was mediated in medieval literature under three successive genres of *miracula*, *mirabilia*, and *exempla*.[8] *Miracula* constituted anonymous, hagiographical texts sourced in fostering the reputation and history of ecclesiastical establishments, a type prevalent until the twelfth century. *Mirabilia* were collections of supernatural oddities in nature; courtly compilations, they were compiled by 'romanesque' authors such as Walter Map and William of Malmesbury. From the early thirteenth century, collections of exempla began to be distributed by mendicant preachers. Coinciding with the promulgation of the doctrine of Purgatory, they espoused general archetypes and universal truths in their short moral tales. Alphabetically organized and vernacularized preaching manuals were common, such as *An Alphabet of Tales*, which was translated into English in the fourteenth century. Middle English narratives dealing with ghosts are thus furnished almost entirely from the latter category. The courtly, Latin collections of Walter Map and William of Malmesbury have virtually no English equivalent. The dead, however, are not absent from more 'literary' vernacular genres such as romance, and it is these texts too which furnish striking examples of the incursion of the dead among the living, as we have seen in *Sir Amadace*, and will again in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (see below, Chapter 5).

In their exemplary contexts the dead appear in modes that belie any possibility of bodily description. They are perceived as disembodied as voices; or sometimes as spiritual 'somatomorphic' bodies inscribed with their otherworldy tortures. Sometimes, in taking visible form, they implicitly adopt the mantle of the macabre cadaver, a mode of seeing the dead with bodies they should no longer have — an idiosyncratic exercise of aesthetic taste with which we begin.

[8] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, pp. 59–60.

Legends of the Dead I: The Golden Dead

These following tales deserve our attention for their 'macabre' imagination of the corporate dead — All Souls. Taken as a group, they offer us earnest reiterations of themes that we have already seen associated with the dead: the dead in the bedchamber motif witnessed in *The Squire of Low Degree*, and a purgatorial inflection of the grateful dead trope we have seen in *Sir Amadace*.

The saintly dead are the only species of dead who are (or should be) licensed, in a Christian context, to react to the living; though, as we will continue to observe, the anomalous dead, revenants, will continually impose themselves in certain kinds of medieval narrative. That dead saints warded their resting places and relics is a *sine qua non* of medieval hagiography, representative of centuries of ecclesiastical efforts toward Christian appropriation and sublimation of the primitive fear of the dead lingering near the place of their burial, or indeed, retaining a life after death within their graves. For the general population of deceased to roam restlessly about their burial sites was, however, strongly redolent of pagan belief, and therefore unacceptable. In tacit recognition of this fear, a poem in the Vernon manuscript would remind all that

> Vche Mon may be sore aferd
> That hath a soule for to saue,
> Whon he geth bi a Chirche-yerd
> And seoth wher dede men be I-graue.[9]

This implicit fear of the contents of the graveyard is manipulated purposefully in the following sequence of brief tales, all variants of one another, which show the purgatorial dead rise bodily from their graves en masse — an army of the dead. Ultimately, these stories are all based on the sermon tales for All Souls' Day in *The The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, which are seen again and again in English redactions (whole or partial) of *The Golden Legend*: *The South English Legendary* of the late thirteenth century, the *Gilte legende* from the fifteenth century, and the *Festial* of John Mirk from the late fourteenth century. The tale is reworked further in *The Book of the Knight* in the fourteenth and fifteenth

[9] *The Minor Poems of the Vernon MS*, ed. by Carl Horstmann and F. J. Furnivall, EETS, o.s., 98, 117, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1892–1901), II, 443–48, ll. 149–52. This is a version of the popular 'Sayings of Saint Bernard', one of three in the Vernon manuscript, an immense vernacular didactic compilation of the fifteenth century, echoing the language from Bernard's *Contemptus* tract (see above, Chapter 1) on the supernaturally inflected odiousness of the human corpse.

centuries. *The Golden Legend*'s 'graveyard' sermon tale for All Soul's Day — where the ordinary dead are seen to make their return en masse among the living — is one of the key vignettes of the representation of the returning dead in medieval exemplary literature.

We begin with the exemplum from *The Book of the Knight*, which implicitly employs the motifs of sleep and sleeping as metaphors for sin and death, and which domesticates the dramatic and didactic potential of the helpfully intrusive dead in a bourgeois context. The gulf between the living and the dead was frequently breached in sermon tales and exempla to demonstrate the efficacy of the purgatorial 'system', and here we see its most intimate possible transgression — the massed dead as prophylactic, taking to earnest extremes the pattern of *The Squire of Low Degree*.

The Book of the Knight of the Tower is a 1484 translation by William Caxton from the French advice book by the fourth Geoffroy de la Tour-Landry, which he wrote in 1372 as, he claims, a behaviour manual for his daughters.[10] A compendium of exempla concerning good and sinful women, derived from authorities such as the Bible, saints' lives, and sermon tales, it opens with two arresting tales of the dead modelled on *The Golden Legend*'s All-Souls'Day account of the dead (which we will read below). In *The Book of the Knight* we are told of the Emperor of Constantinople's two daughters, and how the younger sister habitually keeps the older awake at night with her prayers devoted to the dead. These dead manifest their gratitude for the relief of their purgation unexpectedly when the two sisters take two knightly brothers as lovers:

> that one [knight] came to the youngest sister, but hym thought he sawe a thousand dede bodies about her in sheetis; and he was sore afraied and afrerde, that he ran awaie as he had be oute of hym selffe, and caute the feuers and grete sikenesse thorughe the fere that he hadde, and laied hym in his bedde, and might not stere for sikenesse. (Wright, p. 6)

However, not only is the youngest daughter preserved in her chastity by the dead (however unwillingly), but she remains completely unaware of their influence, and moreover, unharmed. It is only later, as she visits the young man in his sickbed that she learns the truth, as he confesses 'As y wende to haue entered betwene the

[10] There exists also an earlier fifteenth-century anonymous Middle English translation, which has survived in an incomplete state, in BL, MS Harley 1764, edited by Thomas Wright in 1868 as *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* (EETS, o.s., 33 (London: Trübner), hereafter cited as Wright). I refer to both this version and M. Y. Offord's 1971 edition (EETS, s.s., 2 (London: Oxford University Press), hereafter cited as Offord) of Caxton's translation as *The Book of the Knight* (*of the Tower*) regardless of which version I cite.

curteynes of youre bedde, y sawe so grete nombre of dede men that y was nigh wolde for fere' (Wright, p. 6). Thus we have a spare, and on its own terms unremarkable firsthand account of what it is like to witness the dead, whose only narrative interest is in the witness seeing them in a place he might least have hoped to see them. Yet the affinity between bed and grave, and between sleeping and dying, is obvious. This makes the sleep of the dead a light one; they wake, as it were, from their own grave-beds to protect their benefactor from an altogether softer bed of carnal infraction, and from the metaphorical sleep of sin. The elder sister, who has mocked her younger sister's habit of praying at night, is left untroubled and, indeed, uninterrupted by the dead. However, when it later emerges that she is pregnant, her father has her drowned (child and all), and the Knight burnt alive (in Caxton, 'flayed'). He marries off the pious younger daughter to a king of Greece. The Knight's didactic message therefore urges for his daughters what might be thought a desirable, moralized 'necrophilia': they are to share their beds only with the Christian dead, a far more morally wholesome and beneficial coupling than any earthly lover.

The Knight is keen to supplement his initial theme, having declared it meet 'to praie for alle cristen soules that ben dede, atte alle tymes that ye wake' (Wright, p. 5). His second tale is of a gentlewoman, chased into a bush by a lord 'forto fulfelle his foule delit' (Wright, p. 7). In the original French version, the woman is chased into a *jardin*, which Caxton translates as 'a hole in the ground', or 'hiding place' (it is perhaps possible he wished to convey the notion of the woman stumbling into a grave). At this point the woman says, 'vygylles for the dede men' (in the earlier English MS Harley 1764 translation she is said to utter 'dirige for alle cristen sowles'), whereupon the man, as he approaches her, sees more than ten thousand 'prysonners buryed that kepte her | And had of them so grete fere and drede | that anon he torned and flede' (Offord, p. 16). In the Harley version he sees not prisoners, but 'dede folk about her', and the part of the Office of the Dead she has recited, the 'Dirige', would in fact have been sung in the presence of the corpse at matins before the funeral. Caxton's 'prisoners' is probably a misreading of the contraction of *personnes* in the French, according to Offord (p. 198 nn. 16, 22), but Caxton may well have thought 'prisoners' an appropriate choice also in this context, liable as they are to mass-burial and an especial need of prayer; they are, to be sure, prisoners of Purgatory whose parole has not yet been granted. The example is brought to its correct conclusion — the would-be rapist afterwards assures the woman that he will henceforth keep his distance from her as 'she had to kepe her a ferdfulle companie' (Wright, p. 7). But, as before, the beneficiary remains oblivious to the presence of her cohort of grateful dead. If their sight is to

be a torment for malefactors, then it is one certainly to be withheld from those they wish to keep from harm.

Both of these 'cautionary tales for girls' wield the dead as a means of provoking the utmost fear of carnal infraction — dead flesh to ensure a virtuous yoking of the desires of the flesh of the living, as it were, a recognizable variation on the rhetorical impulses of the *contemptus mundi*. Macabre resonance is tacitly afforded in the appearance of the dead men — their sole collective description — as buried or clad in winding sheets — all suggestive of the appearance of rotting cadavers, a suggestion made explicit in at least one illuminated version of the *Legenda aurea* (discussed below). In the English narrative, the dead are emphasized as being present in prodigious numbers, the verifiably unnumbered dead, appearing in charnel-like throngs of one thousand, and then ten thousand. Both women pray for *all* souls, and, in the logic of the narrative, *all* souls do appear. Yet the nature of the apparition of the dead is ambiguous, and must belie any expectation of narrative verisimilitude. In the Knight's first tale, the presence of the dead is apparently phantasmic — a thousand souls compressed into the space afforded by one bed. But the effect they provoke in their victim is real enough, suggestive of pestilence, and also a sickness found in other tales of this type when mortals are said to have been in contact with the aerial substance of demons.[11] In the Knight's second tale, the presence of the dead is either a physical manifestation, but visible only to the malefactor; or alternatively phantasmic, a vision perceived only in the mind of the transgressor. Indeed, Mirk's version of this tale in his *Festial* expressly relates the dead as rising from their graves as 'deed bodies' — animated corpses; not phantoms with the appearance of corpses (see below). In *The Book of the Knight* though, the apparition of the dead is not so concretely corporeal, as they appear ostensibly in no immediate proximity to their graves. The Knight certainly is in no way interested in their substance, but it seems, regardless of their makeup, these dead appear as they would appear in their graves, and not as they might appear in Purgatory. They have no need to show their purgatorial torments in a recognizably 'living visage' to beg for relief of their purgation — they assume their cadaver form the more to terrify miscreants, an implied assumption of appearance all the more necessitated perhaps, by the fact that they take no physical action, unlike their models in *The Golden Legend*.

The use in the Knight's two tales of the dead as wardens against sexual transgression (rather than against any other vice), including rape, is interesting. He doubtless regards them as the most appalling and effective kind of chaperone he

[11] See J. A. McCulloch, *Medieval Faith and Fable* (London: Harrap, 1932), p. 69.

can think of, and in the first tale, he has neatly killed two birds with one stone. This example is not only a warning for his daughters of the consequences of female concupiscence but an illustration of the *possible* (albeit unlikely) benefits of prayers for the dead. The example is repeated in the second tale, but this time without the added warning of cupidity in young women. It is, if anything, an example against lust in noblemen. The Knight mentions in his prologue that he once wrote a similar book for his sons, and this book remains lost to us, if indeed it ever existed. We can only wonder if he included this story at the outset of the book for his sons as a warning of the consequences of attempted rape.

These two examples vividly demonstrate the efficacy of prayers for the Christian, purgatorial dead. Such prayers are effective because the dead are *shown* to become immediately aware of them, shortening their stay in Purgatory — providing instant relief, rather like a spiritual aspirin. Indeed, according to *The Arte and Crafte to Dye Well* souls in Purgatory are also permitted to see what their benefactors on earth are doing for them.[12] Ultimately, the dead, powerless to help themselves in Purgatory, are shown to be powerful friends to the living, to be cultivated throughout life, as much as any patron saint.

Thus *The Book of the Knight* begins with 'last things', specifically in the form of tales of miracles performed by the dead. These tales seem to be offered here as an astringent, programmatic antidote to the youth of his daughters, too young to fear death themselves. Of course, opening his book with such an energetic *memento mori* is also an act of skilful narrative arrangement; a scary pair of stories to excite his daughters' interest at the outset of a long sequence of lessons — an act of the didactic and dramatic happily converging, in a mode unlikely to have detracted from the book's popularity — one which saw it reach wide audiences in print after the space of a century.

The earlier versions of this exemplum of the dead are from the thirteenth-century *South English Legendary* and the fourteenth-century *Festial*'s first sermon for All-Souls' Day. They are short enough to quote almost in their entirety, beginning with the *Legendary*'s account from BL, MS Harley 2277:

> A clerk hadde while a wone · whan he bi churche come
> To sigge for alle Cristene soule · De Profundis ilome
> O tyme he com therforth late · theoues him come aboute
> & assaillede him faste to robbi · he nuste what do for doute

[12] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 352.

The bodies that were ibured there · his bedes hi yulde anon
Hi come with wepne him to helpe · & sturte forth euerechon
Euerech with such maner wepne · as we vsieth alyue
Plough man with his aker staf · schutere with bowe & knyue
About this theoues hi come echon · & gone hem to dryue
To here put hi wende siththe aye · the clerk hamward blyue
& thus his beden were iyulde · that he bad er ofte
Ich am siker aweiward the theoues · ne makede here pas noght softe
For ich wot non of you nescholde · hem habbe so sore agaste
A wonder bataille hit was on · hadde hit long ilaste
For ich wene ther nis no champioun · that hadde ther ibeo
That nadde sone ynome his red · hamward forto fleo.[13]

(A clerk once had a habit when he passed any church
To say for all Christian souls De Profundis, often
One time coming there late, thieves set about him
And assailed him quickly, to rob him — he didn't know what to do
The bodies that were buried there repayed his prayers
They came with weapons to help him and started forth everyone
Each with such manner weapons as we use alive
Ploughman with his aker-staff; schooter with bow and knife
Surrounding these thieves they came, each one and drove against them
Back to there pits then they went surely, and the clerk blithly homewards
And in this way his prayers were repaid that he had often offered
I'm sure that afterward the thieves never again made these unkind effort
I'd swear none among you could have frightened them so [*as the dead*]
A wondrous battle it was to see; had it lasted long
I'd say there's no champion that had he been there
He'd have thought the better of it and high-tailed it home!)

In this instructive marvel the dead constitute a terrifying 'other', yet concomitantly are familiarized almost poignantly for the audience through the tools they wield even after death. Ancient apprehension of the propensity of the dead to continue with their lives *beneath* the earth is hinted at here, even in the same breath as their Christian, purgatorial experience is verified for the audience. The dead bear the impression of older lineages of the denizens of the Otherworld of folk belief; they are too strong even for the fiercest of warriors, and their

[13] *SEL*, II, 469–70, ll. 179–94.

appearance is a phenomenon that wreaks permanent (if positive) changes upon the malign living who encounter them. The beneficiary of their aid proceeds home perhaps even unaware of their intervention, but nonetheless 'blyue'. Yet despite their extraordinary nature, it is their ordinariness as the 'ordinary dead' (All Souls) which is re-emphasized for us. To help their friend they must use the bread-and-butter tools of their trade — they cannot exercise the more ineffable powers of saints to protect him; the scene presented could almost be that of a village squabble. In Mirk's prose redaction of this same story from his *Festial*, for the same feast (All Souls' Day), our clerk has become a layman, and, as before:

> [H]e was pursewet wyth enmys, that he flogh homward; but when he come ynto the chyrche-yeorde, he thoght 'Now ys tyme forto say 'De profundys', and knelut adowne, and sayde. And anon therwyth all the chyrch-yeorde rose full of bodyes, yche on wyth an ynstrument yn hys hond of his craft, and dryuen ageyne his enmyes. And when thay seen that, thay cryed God mercy, and thes men and he allway after were the more deuot forto pray for the sowles. Thus devout prayer helpeth moch sowles. (pp. 269–70)

Just as before, a graveyard filled by a population of sensitive dead is pressed into service as a consolatory example. It emphasizes even more the benefits for *all* the living of praying for the dead, since even the man's enemies are left reformed by the experience. Nor are these anecdotes of the anomalous, unquiet, retributive dead; the fact that these dead are sentient and vengeful is not the point, paradoxically — their actions are doctrinally authorized, and not something to be feared by the godly. Here nevertheless, we have the imaginative exploitation of residual elements of what can easily be recognized as northern European folk beliefs concerning the living dead, now wielded in a Christian exegetical context. Still, they do not approach Norse writing in this regard. Several Icelandic sagas (including *Grettis Saga*, *Grænlendinga Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, and *Eyrbyggja Saga*), recount their own society's popular belief of reanimated corpses, or *draugr*, returning physically to molest the living, at times without apparent cause. The dead appear in these sagas in a mode reflective of pagan attitudes towards the pagan dead. Yet even these texts, set down in the fourteenth century (contemporary with Middle English derivatives of *The Golden Legend*), are fully cognizant of Christian culture and burial rites. They are highly idiosyncratic products of European medieval literature, more reflective of local tastes, and popular belief than analogous products of mainland European, Latinate, literary and ecclesiastical culture.[14]

[14] Discussion in Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 13. List in Caciola, 'Wraiths' p. 17 n. 44, who also lists modern scholarship on the topic, including Schmitt's.

The *Festial* supplements its *naraccio* of the dead with an embellished version of the tale, telling of a priest suspended by his bishop for knowing and saying nothing apart from the Requiem mass which he nevertheless sings 'yche day deuowtly aftyr his conying'. One day, following the priest's suspension, as the bishop responsible crosses the churchyard, 'ded bodyes risen vp aboute hym, a grete nowmbyr'.[15] *Speaking* to him, they say they will kill him unless he restores 'their' priest to them. The mere pursuit by the dead of their benefactor's enemies to scare them off is now supplanted by the explicit, spoken promise of murder. It is nominally an unchristian response from those, who, though dead, are not to be deemed unfettered from Christian bonds of conduct. This tale's redaction in *An Alphabet of Tales* augments still further the more pronounced horror of the vengeful dead. Tale DCLXXXVI, *Sacerdos debet frequenter pro mortuis celebrare* (attributed to Peter of Cluny), witnesses the dead, having spoken to the Bishop, still with instruments in their hands, proceeding to 'flay' the Bishop, who loses consciousness. He does not die, however; by implication he suffers no physical harm owing to the fact he has beheld a vision, and not a physical assault by the physically returned dead. The text explicitly states 'hym *thoght* at all the dead folk rose' (p. 460, my italics). In both versions of the tale, the actions of the dead are redeemed from suspicions of the demonic by their positive outcome, condign to Christian charity. The Bishop hereafter joins in the prayers of his reinstated priest for all souls, and the dead profit from the added potency of a bishop's prayers for their souls.

Despite the latent drama and the satisfying, sensational, supernatural theme of this account, Mirk recommends his tale (after Jacobus de Voragine) simply as an example to demonstrate how prayers relieve the dead. It is perhaps easy to over-praise the literary merits of these narratives, even allowing for the intended absence of literary 'art' in these sermon tales. We look in vain for descriptions of the revenant corpses witnessed in *The Antwyrs off Arthure* or *The Three Dead Kings* (see below, Chapter 5) which might accord with the language of physical putrefaction beloved of the *contemptus mundi*. Such language is not grafted onto the narratives of the exempla we have just seen, however condign an innovation it might be — an innovation which ensures that *The Three Dead Kings* is, in fact, an idiosyncratic text. These exempla texts derived from *The Golden Legend* are to be as brief and to-the-point as possible. It is not required of this exemplum to take artistic delight in the description of the corpses as do the alliterative poets of *The*

[15] *Festial*, p. 271.

Three Dead and *Awntyrs*, who indeed might be thought of as relishing the description of almost everything — macabre ghosts proving no exception. But, just as the sermon tale's avoidance of such description helps temper the tale's supernatural elements, in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *The Three Dead*, description in the macabre idiom, using homiletic language, expressly reinforces the presence of the supernatural. The miraculous nature of the appearance of the dead in Mirk receives no buttressing by reference to iconography.

Nevertheless, despite these versions largely shunning explicit verbal description of the risen corpse, and their English manuscripts being devoid of illustrations, this tale from *The Golden Legend* joins, in one instance, the suite of themes available to the iconographers of the macabre. Jean-Claude Schmitt draws special attention to this in a fifteenth-century Flemish manuscript of the *Légende doreé*, where the dead rising from their graves are shown as horribly decomposed, in a manner consistent with the iconography of the *Danse Macabre* and *Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*. However macabre, Schmitt describes it as a 'particularly beautiful' realization of the rising dead, part of a movement of 'the macabre art that takes hold of ghosts in the later Middle Ages'.[16] The illumination of this story pays 'a greater attention to the future of the cadaver and to the stages of its decomposition: sometimes the flesh is still firm, sometimes the bones stick through the skin, which bursts and reveals the skeleton, and sometimes time has left only a whitened skeleton'.[17] Judging from Mirk and his sources in Voragine, audiences of the vernacular sermons on the beneficial activities of the dead of Purgatory were often spared the verbalization of the macabre attributes of the dead — attributes which we might expect given the *contemptus mundi*'s delectation of the decay of corpses. Clearly, narrative language does not always require the macabre idiom or the language of *contemptus mundi* for the dead to come alive. Ultimately, these stories praise the beneficial spiritual interface of the living and the dead, an interface, mediated through their apparent physical encounter of one another; yet where these stories were to be seen as well as read, it is interesting to observe how the physical interface of the dead mandates use of a visual idiom which shows the dead at their visual worst.

[16] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 216. The illumination occurs in the French-owned fragment of the Morgan-Mâcon *Golden Legend*, in Mâcon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 3, fol. 25^{v}.

[17] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 215.

Legends of the Dead II: Articulating the Corpse

We have witnessed one mode of authorizing the return of the dead to the living: the system of Purgatory, which permits prayers to be deposited for the needful dead and redeemed with interest by the needful living. Yet, outside of these constraints, corpses could return to life under two conditions in medieval thought: they could be animated by the spirit of a demon, or, in a mode less rationalized (and redolent of folk belief), the dead could simply leave their graves of their own volition. Nancy Caciola has highlighted the dichotomy in medieval discourse in the reception of the revenant dead as either demonically articulated, 'possessed' copses, or as literal, 'living' corpses — the dead individual returned to life in the flesh.[18] In her survey of Latinate sources from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, Caciola notes how this dichotomy accords to two contrasting modes of narrative. Didactic collections favour a more orthodox exegesis of the returning dead, downplaying the paganism inherent in bodily revivification, and emphasizing the idea of diabolic interference. More secularly inflected chronicles and compendia of marvels are more sanguine as to the specific pinpointing of the cause of the apparition, content to let them stand as miracles or inexplicable wonders.[19] Dating from a somewhat later period than the texts of Caciola's historical survey, the sermon and exempla collections that form the bulk of the Middle English representations of the dead do not uniformly support any one mode of interpreting the nature of revenant as outlined above. Ultimately, the moral trajectory and regulation of the dead is very clear in most accounts — the dead appear and are either sped out of Purgatory through suffrage, or confirmed in their infernal abode to the greater edification of the living. Whether these revenants are to be classified as animate bodies or noncorporeal spirits remains outside the interest and intention of the narrator.

One example of the classification of the returned dead in Middle English occurs in John Mirk's *Festial*. In its funeral sermon, 'In Die Sepulture', he cites the danger of the demonic reanimation of a body as one exigent reason for a body to be brought to church in death, and in illustration of this offers the following exemplum:

> And yet hit is ofton sene that fendis han pouste [power] to troublon a cors that hath not hys ful sacrament of holy chyrch, and that I preue by this ensaumpl. I fynde that ther wer thre bretheren at debate in a toune, and weron slayne all thre; but the too haddon alle ther

[18] Caciola, 'Wraiths', pp. 10–26.

[19] Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 19.

> rythus [rites], and the thrydde was not hosullud [confessed], and so weron beried togydur in the chyrch. Than com a fend and toke this cors that was not anoylud, and yode into itte and so forth into the toun, and makud many cryes be the which men weron sore agaste; and dured thus a long tyme. Than was ther an ankur in that toun in the chyrch, that was in hys preyeres before mydnythe, and seygh the fende come be lythe of the mone leke an ape; and whan he com to the graue, anone the corse arose, and he yode into hytte, and so forth in hys iurney, as he was wonte. (p. 295)

Conjured by the holy man, the demon says he has power over any *body* not given last rites, although the soul of the body is safe from interference. He animates the corpse to tempt others with sin. Once articulated, the animate body, as we might expect, causes consternation in the town. This tale, of course, in rationalizing the wandering dead as demonically possessed, is part and parcel of how medieval Christian belief can recategorize the pagan or the anomalous. Where pagan gods, idols, and supernatural beings such as fairies could find their place in a Christian universe only by being diabolicized (or allegorized), so it is too with the returning dead.

What emerges, even in this 'skeletal' account, is the tangibility of the spiritual and bodily components of the revenant: the exemplum is determined to help audiences understand the process of possession by articulating it in the most easily imaginable way. A demon, *visibly* manifested in the form of a homuncular ape, visibly enters the inert body to manipulate it. As with other exempla, it is only a man of God who can discern the motivating spirit unseen to others. Apes, always components of medieval demonology and bestiaries, are the form chosen by what we, today, would read as poltergeists. Another short English tale from the *Gesta Romanorum* relates how a spirit in the form of an ape physically wrestled with a brave judge and would have killed him but for the intervention of the Virgin Mary (pp. 408–09).

The latent threat of demonic manipulation was long established in Christian thought. Baptismal rites were expressly apotropaic wardings of the body and soul from demonic influence. Baptism alone was not enough to preserve the body from its spiritual enemies after death, however. Thomas de Cantimpré explained, 'Since the structure of a dead body remains behind, just as a man can use a structured body like a garment, so the Devil can sneak into it and mould the mouth to voices and words again, and recall the tendons to the movement of its members.'[20] This is the 'mummy possessed' (lent misogynistic application) of John Donne's lyric 'Love's Alchemy', which employs the conceit of the demonically animated

[20] Thomas de Cantimpré, *Bonum universale de apibus* (Douai, 1597), II. 49. 7 (pp. 368–69); cited and translated in Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 14.

corpse to denote borrowed intelligence, not their own, inhabiting the bodies of women: 'Hope not for mind in women; at their best, | Sweetness and wit they are, but mummy, possess'd'.[21]

Such possession appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's first substantial work, *The Book of the Duchess*, believed to date from 1368 as an occasional allegory on the death of Blanche, the wife of his patron, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. One episode from this highly digressive and episodic poem on death should be highlighted here. Taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of Ceyx and Alcione ultimately leaves us with a morbid narrative of spiritual possession of corpse. Juno, prompted by the prayers of Alcione for a revelation of the fate of her husband, Ceyx, lost at sea, commands a messenger to tell Morpheus, the god of dreams, to go to the bottom of the ocean and

> take up Seys body the king,
> That lyeth ful pale and nothynge rody.
> Bid hym crepe into the body
> And doo hit goon to Alchione
> The queen, ther she lyeth alone,
> And shew hir shortly, hit ys no nay,
> How hit was dreynt thys other day,
> And do the body speke right soo,
> Ryght as hyt was woned to doo,
> The whiles that it was alive.[22]
>
> (Take up King Seys' body
> That lies pale and not all rosy-hued.
> Bid him [Morpheus] creep into the body
> And make it go to Alcione
> The queen, where she lies alone,
> And show her quickly, without a doubt
> How it was drowned the other day,
> And make the body speak right there
> Just as it was accustomed to
> While it was alive.

[21] John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by C. A. Patrides (New York: Everyman, 1985), p. 86, ll. 23–24.

[22] *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and others, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), ll. 142–52. All citations of Chaucer are from this edition; my translations.

The corpse of Alcione's drowned husband revisits her, animated by Morpheus, who creeps into and takes possession of the body. Manifestly bordering, in the macabre idiom, on the point of putrefaction, this is a body withheld from the waking sight, but not, evidently, the imaginative sight of Alcione. Morpheus, then, is an animating spirit, similar to the ones witnessed in examples above, but he is also the god of dreaming, so that Ceyx is animated only, as it were, by the spirit of a dream. Alcione presumes the voice she hears while sleeping to be a dream of the voice of her husband, and Morpheus/Ceyx vanishes the moment she opens her eyes (l. 212) so that she never sees him — unlike the audience of the poem. Thus, instead of a dream occulted within the mind of a dreamer, what happens is a physical manifestation of the dead *disguised* as a dream — a means to distance the beloved from the macabre physical realities of death — an immediate physical dramatization of 'Ceyx's' words 'you shul me never on lyfe yse' (l. 205). Thus we have an apparition of the dead appearing, if not actually within a dream, than in *simillima somno* — 'very much as in a dream' — the same phenomenon registered in the dead Creusa's appearance to her husband Aeneas (*Aeneid*, II. 776–84).[23] The appearance of the dead here, as elsewhere in accounts of the apparition of the dead, heralds the death of the visionary (even if here occasioned by heartbreak); Alcione dies within three days (l. 214).

In the end it is a horrifyingly *physical* apparition that appears before Alcione, even as she dreams — a macabre exploration of the imaginative possibilities of literary dreams of the dead (as *The Book of the Duchess* is itself, a dream-vision). Narrative can only give the *semblance* of making the dead come alive again; and this opening, tacit expression of anxiety of the decorum of bringing the dead back to life presages the rest of *The Book of the Duchess* where Blanche of Lancaster, described in the assumed body of an allegorical stand-in, is lovingly described for the audience as she was in life.

We do not see the consequences of the sudden withdrawal of this animating force from the body of Ceyx, but in other accounts, where the essence of life was provided by a demonic, not a human, spirit, the consequences for the body upon its removal can be alarming. *An Alphabet of Tales* relates the tale of a young clerk who sang so beautifully that all were enamoured of his voice. Hearing his music, a holy man smells a rat:

[23] This point is made by J. I. Wimsatt, 'The Sources of Chaucer's Seys and Alcyone', *Medium Aevum*, 36 (1967), 231–41 (pp. 237–38), cited in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson and others, p. 968 (nn. 201–05).

> 'This voice and this melodie is not of a man bod[y], rather of the devull.' And all men mervayld of this at he said, & evyn furtwith he coniured hym; & the fend onone went his way, & lefte the bodie as a dead, dry caryon. (p. 86)

Here, the body is transformed into a desiccated mummy as soon as its animating force is withdrawn, the narrator evoking a macabre cadaver with the most economical of phrases. 'Dry carrion' can have few visual interpretations other than the appearance belonging to the mummies of *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* and the *Danse Macabre*, even if it lacks the florid verbosities of the catalogues of rot common to the *contemptus* tradition. *Discretio spirituum* as an ability confined to the holiest of men is re-emphasized here, as is the perilous origin and reward for sensual delights, here over-lovely music and singing.

Diabolical or animating influences are not always at work in the appearance of the unquiet dead, however. Saints, or those with saintly attributes, remain active after martyrdom to exemplify their sanctity and bring retribution upon those who have killed them. Chaucer's 'Prioresses' Tale', is a paradigm of the kind of anti-Semitic, pogromistic blood-libel narratives with which the tale's genre, a miracle of the Virgin, could be associated. In this tale, a young Christian boy who has his throat cut by the enemies of his faith — Jews — for his devoted singing of the Marian antiphon *Alma redemptoris mater*, persists in his singing even in death. He stops singing and falls dead as soon as a 'grein' (a grain, or possibly pearl) which allowed him to sing while dead is taken from his mouth by an abbot, who interrogates him as a revenant. The child's testimony from beyond the grave constitutes a passage of marvellous pathos:

> 'My throte is kut unto my nekke boon',
> Seyde this child, 'and, as by wey of kynde [*according to nature*],
> I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon.
> But jesu crist, as ye in bookes fynde,
> Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde,
> And for the worship of his mooder deere
> Yet may I synge *O Alma* loude and cleere.
>
> This welle of mercy, cristes mooder sweete,
> I loved alwey, as after my konnynge [*after my understanding*];
> And whan that I my lyf sholde forlete [*and when I was dying*],
> To me she cam, and bad me for to synge
> This anthem verraily in my deyynge,
> As ye han herd, and whan that I hadde songe,
> Me thoughte she leyde a greyn upon my tonge.'

Dying, the child is urged to sing on by the Virgin, and, now dead, still sings through the virtue of the anomalous 'grein' she places on his tongue:

> Wherfore I synge, and synge moot certeyn,
> In honour of that blisful mayden free,
> Til fro my tonge of taken is the greyn;
> And after that thus seyde she to me;
> 'My litel child, now wol I fecche thee,
> Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.
> Be nat agast, I wol thee nat forsake.'
> (ll. 649–69)[24]

Yet such an apparently arbitrary, anomalous device as a 'grein' placed on the tongue of the dead child enabling its animation post-mortem, is a necessary one for the regulation of the miracle of the dead child. It shows that the child cannot simply have willed himself back to life, and shows, moreover, that he is not in any sense a revenant thirsty for revenge. He is, of course, a martyr, and martyrs' deaths are always to be sublimated as divine comedies, not earthly tragedies.

The dead of hagiography are the extraordinary dead — to be admired, not emulated. Elsewhere of course, the 'ordinary' dead wake so that they may expiate their sins in this world. Mirk relates in the *Festial*, in the sermon for the dedication of the church:

> Also ther ben mony that walketh aftyr that thay ben ded and buryet yn holy plase; but that is of no wexyng of the fend, but of grace of God, forto gete hom som helpe of som synne that thay ben gylty yn, and may not haue no rest, tyll that synne be holpen. (p. 281)

In illustration of which, he relates a local ghost legend strikingly redolent of accounts of the wandering *draugr* of Norse literature, a tale of how a man cursed by the Abbot of Lulsull Abbey for stealing his ox dies before he can be absolved:[25]

> Wherfor his sprite yede nyghtes [*went about on nights*] and soo feeryd [*frightened*] the parysch that aftyr the sonne going downe ther dryst no man go out of his yn [*that after sundown no man dared going outdoors*]. Then, as the prest, Syr Thomas Wodward, that then was parysch prest, ther he toke Godys body [i.e., the consecrated Eucharist], and yede [*went to visit*] toward a seke woman at the sonne goyng don. And then come this spyryte, and mete hym, and told hym who he was and why he yede, and prayde hym forto take his

[24] *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson and others, p. 212.

[25] The term *draugr* is Old Icelandic, and refers specifically to the walking dead; see Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 15.

> wife, and go to the abbot of Lulsull and help that he wer asolyet [*help to have him absolved*], and er he myght haue no rest [*until then he might have no rest*]. (p. 281)

This done, the 'spirit' goes to his rest. We have no indication in this briefest of accounts how the dead man is visibly manifested as 'spirit'. If an animated body, his description as such is avoided; and it appears that Mirk draws a careful distinction between the puppetry practised by the demon upon the insensate corpse in the example above, with the account of the unbound spirit clamouring for its surcease in the second. Yet whatever form the spirit takes, it is a visible manifestation capable of engaging with the priest and making its presence felt in the town, implicitly bearing the bodily appearance of the dead man, if not the corporeal substance.

An example from *An Alphabet of Tales* expressly depicts the reanimated corpse amid a relation of the plight of the dead upon their arrival into Purgatory. As with the example from Mirk, this is an illustration of the consequences of (terminally) delayed absolution. A monk, Hubertus, asks his abbot to be with him at the time of his death. As chance would have it, the Abbot happens to be away when Hubertus actually dies. On his return the Abbot goes immediately to the altar and prays for the dead monk, who is lying there in repose:

> And as he satt in his prayers, hym thought this monke rase oute of his grafe & come vnto hym, & said, 'Benedicite!' right as he had been o life [*alive*] and askid a due absoluccion. So this abbott, gretely astonyd ther-with, said, 'miseriatur tui, & c., et absolucionem' And than this monk askid him penans. And this abbott wiste neuer whatkyn penaunce sulde be giffen vnto thaim that wer deade; and he commanded hym, that he sulde be in purgatorie vnto [*until*] he had said a mes [*mass*] for hym. And when the monk hard this, he cryed so horrible, that alle the abbay hard, on this maner of wise [*in this way*]; 'O! thou man with-oute mercie! That has commanded me to be so long in the grete payne of purgatorie.' And with that he vanysshid away. (p. 15).

Hubert always seems to have been a name of convenience of medieval clerics (Chaucer's friar from *The Canterbury Tales* is one such), yet the mere name may indicate the story having been loosely derived from one of the thirteenth-century French poet Gautier de Coincy's *Miracles* (where a Hubert appears to a fellow monk a year after his death). The apparition we are concerned with, of a kind however commonplace in medieval exempla, still prompts several questions on reading in its appearance in the English *Alphabet*. The revenant immediately establishes its non-diabolical nature: it can utter and accept the benediction, something no demon could. As ever, though, the narrator is otherwise non-committal on the nature of the revenant. It is inferred that the Abbot merely imagines the revivification of the dead monk: 'hym *thought* this monke rase'. This

reanimation of the dead body is an impossibility at which the narrator tacitly expresses wonder: dead Hubertus approaches and salutes his 'greatly astonished' abbot 'right as if he were alive'. It is the adoption by the dead of the mannerisms of the living which gives rise to doubt here: what species of being is a dead person, and crucially, 'whatkyn penaunce sulde be giffen vnto thaim at wer deade? Even if prayer may be offered for both the living and the dead, the living can only assign penance for the living. The message of the tale is that we have only the living to rely on when dead to secure our release from Purgatory; we cannot complete it ourselves when dead, as the dead Hubertus wrongly imagines, but only beforehand. The ubiquitous warning of the consequences of *mors improvisa* — unexpected death — is tempered by the (somewhat galling) consolation that suffering in Purgatory is finite.

At issue here also is the folkloric trope of the dead returning to ensure the fulfilment of a deathbed bargain. The Abbot once more fails in his pact, when he informs the dead man he must again deny him immediate pardon. This deferment of delivery of a matter of hours, until a mass can be sung, represents an intolerably long time to a spirit in Purgatory, and his sudden, enraged reaction here is intended to be genuinely frightening. Finally we have a description of the voice of an enraged corpse: it is 'horrible', and of such force that all the abbey hears it as the token and confirmation of the monk's actual return from death. He vanishes suddenly, body and all it seems. We are not told what remains in his tomb. Narrated with an eye to sudden gestures, the dead monk's furious departure is as sudden and unheralded as his return. Though not a damned soul, his shrieks of despair at the failure of his plea all but mimic the cries of the damned. The dead of this tale must therefore prompt in their audience unease in their unpredictable volatility. These brief tales are the ideal means for portraying the dead as vehicles for exegetical narrative. The traits that mark out the dead — sudden, unexpected gestures, dramatic cries — are the very gestures that are best suited to tales which have no space for description or psychological premeditation. It is, as we have remarked above, the dramatic vividness of these tales of the dead that redeem them from any imagined literary worthlessness. They indicate a desire among their audience to be entertained and admonished by accounts of sudden death and its consequences. These are cautionary tales made the more dramatic for their exploitation of an idiomatic sense of the dead as beings liable to sudden return and unpredictable action, and as beings with implacable desires (which in Hubertus's case is immediate delivery from pain). These insatiable dead are a motif witnessed elsewhere, with far more frightening, if less doctrinally useful, implications.

Tale LXX from BL, MS Add. 9066 of the *Gesta Romanorum* is the startling story of a dead man who all but wills himself back to life to wreak vengeance on the man who wrongfully put him to death. The story is attributed spuriously to Bede by the narrator of the *Gesta*, an attribution which serves to place this wonder at a time distant to that of the audience.

Coveting the field of a poor man, a juror, or magistrate of York, 'plants' his horse on the poor man's property, has him fraudulently tried as a thief and hanged. Approaching nightfall, the juror rides to the gallows, and seeing his victim hanging there, taunts the dangling corpse: 'Lo! if thou wolde haue lette me have hadde thy close [*field*], thou shuld haue hade thy life, and gone on thy fete.' Drawing his sword, he cuts down the corpse.

As soon as the man sheathes his sword, 'the dedman sterte vp, and toke the horse by the brydill'. Here the narrator deftly renders a startling reanimation — one prompted by mockery and taunting of a corpse. No narrative astonishment on this seeming miracle is offered. Implicit however, is the medieval response to ungodliness, which would typically be seen in hagiographical narratives, where pagan characters would inevitably pour scorn on the promise of Christian resurrection. Yet the dead man is far from being a saint, and, having died a 'bad' death — unritualized, unforeseen, and violent — his status as Christian in death is already tenuous, even if he is still the wronged party. This manner of dying — violent, sudden, and unjust — was always liable to hinder the dead resting quietly in their graves in popular lore, and is seen to prompt the dead man's revivification in this example. In folkloric irony, the corpse who had endured the mockery of his murderer does indeed hear it, and rises to respond. Denied burial, he has not been adequately partitioned from the living — always a denial liable to leave the dead restless. We are told now 'the dedman ledde hym to towne' — a posture strongly redolent of Dance of Death iconography — 'and into the chirch, where mych folk was, atte dirge of a dedeman that lay on the bere' (pp. 386–87).

A bizarre conference of two dead men ensues: 'and when he with the rope aboute his necke and the Iurror comyn atte bere, the man that was hanged, seide to the dedman that laye on the bere "rise vp, on goddis behalfe, and gif a dome betwene this man and me"'. The latter corpse obliges, unceremoniously sitting upright, and utters his doom: the Juror is to go to Hell when he dies. The Hanged Man, however must also go to Hell, as, in rising from death to avenge himself, in having 'waried and cursed' his tormentor, he has died out of charity — a stern judgement from a fellow reanimated corpse, and an illustration precisely of what the murdered child in Chaucer's 'Prioress' Tale' is not. His quasi-oracular task performed, the corpse slumps down again onto his bier like a puppet with its

strings cut, and 'he that was hanged felle downe dede also'. The Juror remains alive, and altogether traumatized, having by now 'loste all his wittes'. He is taken to bed by the townsfolk, and dies soon after (p. 387).

As ever, the 'moralitie', blind to the sensationalism of the tale advises merely what peril it is to kill for men's goods (falsely), and what peril it is to die out of charity, and not 'gyfe the dome to god, that can wisely deme, and wisely rewarde'. God may, it is to be inferred, have proved to be a less dire doomsman than a fellow corpse unwillingly pressed into service. Yet the hanged man's revenge is a pyrrhic one. Having compounded what would have been understood as a bad death with an unnatural afterlife dedicated to un-Christian vengeance, the dead man attains only damnation. The dead are much to be feared in this reading of revenancy, but the consequences for the dead of prompting this fear can be as severe for themselves as they are for the living (p. 387).

In its portrayal of a dialogue of two dead men in legal dispute, this tale has a parallel in John Lydgate's version of a popular legend, *St Austin at Compton*. The tale's original source is the Chronicle of Johannes Bromtonus and is a story conventionally used as an exemplum instructive of the necessity of tithes.[26] The tale recounts how St Augustine, on his mission of conversion to Anglo-Saxon England, raises a priest from the dead to rescind the curse laid upon a tithe defaulter who has also been inadvertently resuscitated after a hundred years.[27] The macabre aesthetic of long-dead bodies is very much to the fore in this account, in marked contrast to the sparser descriptive style of the tale from the *Gesta*, which leaves no room for conveying the imagery of bodily decomposition. In Lydgate's account, a vernacularization of a miracle in several Latin witnesses, Augustine asks the newly risen priest if he has ever seen 'that Owgly careyn lamentable, | The deed body that stood hem beforn' (ll. 279–80). Tempting, but futile to consider in terms of verisimilitude, is how the priest, who cursed the nobleman in life, might possibly recognize him now as a century-old corpse.

[26] See Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1970), pp. 279–80. The Chronicle of Johannes Bromtonus is found in *Acta sanctorum Bollandiensis*, VI. 396. *Manual*, VI, 2080.

[27] Lydgate, John, *Legend of St Austin at Compton*, in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. by H. N. MacCracken, EETS, e.s., 107, o.s., 192, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1911; repr. Oxford University Press, 1933), II, 193–206. A more recent edition is by E. Gordon Whatley and others in *Saints' Lives in Middle English Collections*, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004).

The dead nobleman is first brought to life as a consequence of Augustine's uttering of anathema against all tithe defaulters in the church in which he is holding Mass. This dictum, ordering all guilty of the sin to leave sacred ground, embraces even the dead nobleman who defaulted on his tithes and died without making restitution. He is forced from his churchyard grave in full sight of everyone, and describes his painful, forced reanimation to the saint:

> Geyn thy biddyng I myth no socour haue;
> My Cursed Careyn, ful of corrupcioun,
> By Goddis angel was cast out of my grave.
>
> Thy precept was upon ech a side,
> Being at masse whil thou were in presence,
> No stynkyng flessh myth in the poorche abyde.'
> (ll. 230–35)

Not merely do we comprehend the image of a dead man, described in his own words as a living macabre *transi*, 'full of corruption', but also a fearsome sight in the description of the overarching third-person narration:

> Ther roos out oon ouy of his sepulture,
> Terrible of face, the peeple beholding,
> A gret paas the chirchyeerd passing,
> The Seyntuarye bood ther a greet whyle,
> Al the space the mass was seyeng,
> Feerfully afore the chirche style.
> (ll. 203–08)

The cadaver is greeted with consternation; only the saint can interrogate him, at which, the dead man discloses the resting place of the priest who cursed him in life and asks: 'So ye wil digge and doon youre observaunce, | To delvyn up his boonys dul and rude?' The second witness from the grave is duly raised up on the command of the saint, and duly greeted by his dead parishioner: 'Loo! heer he lith, cheef cause of my grevaunce' (ll. 269–72). This second rising, however, goes without description. As this movement constitutes the resuscitation of a blessed, quasi-saintly individual, there is little doubt but that the sordidness and filth of the nobleman's resurrection are spared the priest; though it is left to our own imagination as to whether the priest is clothed in uncorrupted flesh or not. Certainly, the dead nobleman anticipates him to be nothing other than bones, and it is to the illustration of the nobleman's moral corruption in his excommunicate status that the language of the macabre is deployed in Lydgate's account.

However allusive the reference, Lydgate is a medieval writer who would have known the iconography of the macabre intimately, translating, as he did, the *Danse Macabre* (see above, Introduction, and below, Chapter 7). Responding to Augustine's plea to forgive the dead man (whose tithes will be paid by his similarly errant descendant), 'The last preest reised from his grave, | The tothir corps with bittir fel scorgyng, | Assoyled him his soul for to save' (ll. 326–28). The tale concludes with Augustine bidding the first corpse return to his grave, but offers the dead priest a choice of accompanying him on his ministry. He, however, is happy in Paradise and begs to be permitted to remain there (the saint commends this choice).

Though nowhere as dramatic as this account, the theme of the dead responding to interdiction, seen in Lydgate's *Legend*, is used too in the exemplary tale collection *Jacob's Well*, where St Benedict ultimately forgives two dead nuns who died under his curse for being 'rebel of tunge'. In an exemplum reflective of a misogynistic commonplace, the loquacious nuns are forced out of their graves every time Mass is sung when the deacon urges the departure of all accursed. Interestingly, it is only one woman, stated as their nurse in *An Alphabet of Tales,* who sees this macabre rite, where the nuns are implicitly invisible to all others.[28]

Such narratives of post-mortem expulsion from consecrated burial, by whatever means, and for whatever moral infraction, were commonplace in medieval collections, and ultimately derive from the one collection that served as the model for ghost stories in the Middle Ages, the fourth book of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*. Yet even without an understanding of their narrative lineage, these tales would have impressed themselves on their audiences by their deployment of racy stories marked by vigorous language and everyday imagery.

Implicit in all the forgoing narratives is a unifying theme of judgement, but in a macabre, provisional mode, where the dead judge each other; far from the Last Judgement, the great court of living and the dead at the end of time. Here too, folk memory and custom contribute towards elements of the central themes from Lydgate and 'The Hanged Man's Revenge'. The latter tale is to be associated with the 'bier right', practised in northern Europe in the Middle Ages, which affirmed the right of corpses to 'attend' the trial of those implicated in their death, or the right of the living to bear witness against the deceased. Bodies, as we have mentioned before (above, Chapter 1) were believed to be able to bleed in *cruentatio* or offer up some other sign in these inquests, though this observation

[28] *Jacob's Well*, ed. by A. Brandeis, EETS, o.s., 115 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900), chap. 9c (p. 64). *An Alphabet of Tales*, Tale CCCXIII (II, 216).

should of course be understood in the context of customs that could permit even animals to be tried in courts of law, and it is this matter-of-factness that is silently underscored in the logic of the narratives in Lydgate and 'The Hanged Man's Revenge'. In these tales, the marvel of the animated dead is mediated without any distancing mechanism other than time (they happened long ago). In the tale from the *Gesta*, terms like 'dedeman', 'he that was hanged' are delivered in the text with the same equanimity as (say) 'alderman', almost as if these were terms readily found in estates satire. Similarly, the animate corpses (excepting Lydgate's) go without description, and in the logic of the narrative these are the recent dead, for whom a putrescent description in the macabre idiom would be inappropriate. Indeed it is the very 'freshness' of the dead in 'The Hanged Man's Revenge', that, though a physical attribute implied rather than described by the narrator, is of importance to the reading of the story as an account of return from death. As an all but still-warm corpse, having died only that day, the hanged man implicitly retains the appearance he bore in life. It is precisely this newly dead aspect of the corpse which in many accounts enables the corpse to retain life in many medieval accounts. According to Nancy Caciola, who cites the Latin chronicles and compendia of Walter Map, William of Newburgh, Thomas de Cantimpré, Guillaume d'Auvergne, and Thietmar of Merseburg, among others, the dead could return to life as reanimated corpses as long as their bodies remained enfleshed.[29] This enfleshment could be prolonged by supernatural means, as witnessed in *St Erkenwald* (see below). Their potential for return dissipated along with their decaying flesh, leaving only the dry skeleton which could never be animated.

In the accounts studied by Nancy Caciola, the greatest danger of physical return of the dead was in the immediate aftermath of their death, and this is precisely what happens in our account here from the *Gesta Romanorum*. In this regard the remarks of one such medieval writer, Guillaume d'Avergne are apt. Such revenants 'either are lying intact in their graves, or at the very least, their bones and the rest of their bodies, which decay has not yet been able to consume are there'.[30] According to Caciola, 'The total destruction of the flesh was the key to combating the potency of the dead body. Whether by natural decay or human intervention, the flesh must be dissolved for the corpse to be truly defunct.'[31]

[29] Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 32.

[30] Guillaume d'Auvergne, *De universo*, II. 3. 24; *Opera omnia*, I. 1049: quoted in Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 32.

[31] Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 34.

Ultimately, this dry skeleton (not the putrefying, skeletalizing body of the macabre) was an inert object with no threat to the living inhering in it in medieval belief, and which represented the completion of the long process of death, and marked the utter absence of life.[32]

The traditional perception of the resuscitated dead among medieval audiences might have reinforced this presumption of, as it were, the necessity of flesh. As medieval audiences would have known from the Gospels, Jairus's daughter was resuscitated quickly by Christ (Mark 5. 39–43), and Lazarus too returned before he had progressed (after four days) too far in decay — he was still recognizable to the living even though 'he stank' (John 11. 39); yet such hasty intervention still did not militate against Lazarus's being adduced as a name for the macabre figure, above, in Dunbar's *Flyting*. Yet, ostensibly, these scriptural dead were relatively fresh bodies which could yet logically sustain revivification, however miraculous. It might have been (silently) pondered too as to whether Christ's resurrection could have occurred after more than three days in the tomb. Would the Lord's body have fallen into corruption as his spirit did into Hell? His return after only three days might be imagined to have be dictated by biological necessity — surely his progressive decomposition could no less have been reversed than his wounds of the Passion be effaced. Just as medieval audiences would have pondered the homely, biological workings of the Incarnation and the Blessed Virgin's pregnancy (an 'unmentionable' repeatedly explained in countless medieval lyrics designed to allay such curiosities), so too perhaps would medieval audiences have (silently) pondered the forensic implications of Christ's burial. Such clinical consideration of the processes of death upon the body of Christ was not beyond the pale for medieval vernacular theologians. Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century East Anglian anchorite, imagines in her *Revelations* (or *Shewings*) the Body of Christ undergoing as much decay in the hours after its deposition as if he had been 'a seven-night dead'. In her eighth revelation she perceives with a forensic quality the process of decay taking hold in the newly dead Christ. His face, she says,

> than turnid more dede into blew, and after in browne blew, as the flesh turnyd more depe dede. [...] This was a peinfulle chaungyng, to se this depe deyeng, and also the nose clangen and dryed, to my sigte, and the swete body waxid brown and blak, al changed and turnyd oute of faire, fressch and lifely colowr of Hymselfe into drye deyen.[33]

[32] Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 44.

[33] *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Georgina Ronan Crampton, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), chap. 15, ll. 591–97.

This macabre realization of the incipient putrefaction is mediated by the macabre yet decorous hues of discoloration and decay — black, brown, and blue. Typically iconography of the Crucifixion placed Christ in relief against the mortal corruption of man, always embodied in the relics of Adam (see above, Introduction). Here, Christ is humanized, not merely (as he habitually was) in his human suffering, but now the mortal decay to which every man must succumb.

The language of forensic decay, the narrative counterpart to the homiletic and lyrical discourse of *contemptus mundi*, is used in Lydgate's *Legend* as the natural sign of a long-buried corpse, as well as an index of moral perfidy. Nonetheless we have frequently seen other examples of how the dead can be imagined as sites of anxiety irrespective of any described appearance. It is, then, to an altogether self-consciously ambitious Middle English poem — one which to intellectual and theological ends exploits the corpse as site of decay, wonder, and both anxiety and reassurance — to which we now turn.

The Destiny of Virtuous Flesh in 'St Erkenwald'

If the above texts are silent on the scientific necessity of the retention of the flesh, despite the latent dramatic necessity of the idea, no less silent on the issue is the ineffably more theologically sophisticated alliterative miracle narrative *St Erkenwald*, despite its use, in its culminating episode, of disintegrating flesh as narrative and exemplary catalyst. In this late fourteenth-century text (possibly attributable to the *Pearl*-poet, whose complex and humanizing eschatological strategies we have already observed in Chapter 1), the long-dead body of a virtuous pagan judge is held by divine grace in seeming stasis, uncorrupted, just as his soul is restrained in limbo for a thousand years so that he can plead to his Christian successors for baptism and burial.[34] The preserved body putrefies and disintegrates as soon as it receives the baptism of the Bishop Erkenwald's tears of compassion.

The miracle of *Erkenwald* represents a familiar trope in medieval hagiography — the discovery, or invention of relics — a theme which in some late

[34] An edition of *St Erkenwald* is in *A Book of Middle English*, ed. by J. A. Burrow and T. Turville-Petre (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 201–14 (subsequent citations of *St Erkenwald* refer to this edition, cited by line number in the text). It is entitled *De (Sancte) Erkenwaldo* in the sole manuscript witness, BL, Harley 2250, compiled in 1477. Linguistic and internal evidence places its composition in the period 1390–1410 in Cheshire. Authorship has frequently been ascribed to the *Pearl*/*Gawain*-poet, though Burrow and Turville-Petre argue against this, citing the 'less exuberant, sparer, and more concise' style of *Erkenwald* (p. 201).

medieval iconographic examples, is the occasion for the representation of mummified corpses in the macabre mode. In *Erkenwald*, the bodily remains are not those of a saint, but an anomalous category of deceased — a virtuous pagan. Ostensibly an account of a single miracle (not recorded elsewhere) of Erkenwald, a seventh-century bishop of London, *St Erkenwald* has been argued to be based on a legend of the posthumous resuscitation and baptism by St Gregory of the virtuous (but pagan) Emperor Trajan.[35] The sole source of the version that most resembles the English text is a mid-fourteenth-century Italian commentary by Jacopo della Lana on the Trajan episode in Dante's *Divina commedia*, which sees builders stumble across a coffin containing a skull with a still-fresh tongue. Brought to Pope Gregory, the skull identifies itself as Emperor Trajan, and the Pope, duly impressed by the dead man's life of virtue, has him baptized, procuring the release of the Emperor's soul from Hell. In one late fifteenth-century Flemish tapestry depicting the legend, the tongue survives the subsequent pulverization of the preserved imperial corpse even after the release of the Emperor's soul, as it is the organ whereby Trajan uttered justice.[36] Yet the macabre relics of pagans speaking to holy men is a widespread motif. In the Middle English *Alphabet of Tales* and *Jacob's Well* (the latter's example a more prolix redaction of the former), Macarius, the saint who, in *The Golden Legend*, slept with skulls (discussed above, Chapter 1), is recounted as taking up the skull of a pagan (a pagan priest in *Alphabet*), which he discovers in the wilderness. Commanding it to speak, the skull says that its soul is deep in Hell, but not as deep as those of venal Christians, thus illustrating the anomalous, even volatile position of virtuous heathen in medieval theological discourse.[37]

The author of *St Erkenwald* sets the miracle beneath St Paul's, a condign setting for relation to an English audience.[38] In place of Trajan, we have an anonymous, local subject — an ancient Londoner of unimpeachable moral probity. Similarly, the poet uses a 'local' saint whose reputation was undergoing revival

[35] John Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition: Essays on Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), chap. 11 ('*St Erkenwald* and the Custody of the Past'), pp. 179–99 (p. 185), provides a discussion of this, as does Gordon Whatley in greater length in 'Heathens and Saints: *St Erkenwald* in its Legendary Contexts', *Speculum*, 61 (1981), 330–63.

[36] Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints', p. 362.

[37] *An Alphabet of Tales*, II, 265–66; *Jacob's Well*, pp. 301–02.

[38] Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints', p. 349. For one instance of this account (there are of course others in alternative versions of the text) see *The Defective Version of Mandeville's Travels*, ed. by M. C. Seymour, EETS, o.s., 319 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 12.

amid specific efforts to establish an Erkenwald cult in late fourteenth-century London.[39] The Middle English text of *St Erkenwald* thus represents one example of this saint's emergent, promulgatory literature — a 'foundation legend' for St Paul's, London, and its patron saint.

Opening the sarcophagus reveals that inside 'a blissful body opon the bothum lyggid, | Araide on a riche wise in riall wedes' (ll. 76–77). Clothing and flesh are immaculately preserved:

> Als wemles were his wedes withouten any tecche
> Othir of moulyng othir of motes othir moght-freten,
> And als bryght of hor blee in blysnande hewes
> As thai hade yepely in that yorde bene yisturday shapen;
> And als fresche hym the face and the flesh nakyd
> Bu his eres and bi his hondes that openly shewid
> With ronke rode as the rose and two rede lippes,
> As he in sounde sodanly were slippid opon slepe.
> (ll. 86–92)

> (Just as immaculate were his garments, without any impairment
> Either from mouldering, or blemish, or moth-damage,
> And as bright of their appearance in shining hues
> As if they had in that yard been freshly made yesterday;
> And as fresh in him the face and the naked flesh
> By his ears and by his hands that were openly exposed
> With rich rose-ruddiness and two red lips
> As if he were just fallen sound asleep.) (my translation)

We can interpret the appearance of this (still) fresh corpse to some extent along the lines of the examples, which we have highlighted above, of the *draugr* — like dead who return to the living still preserved in body which we have witnessed in 'The Hanged Man's Revenge' from the *Gesta Romanorum*. The corpse in *St Erkenwald* can be read as retaining (albeit over a prodigious length of time) the attributes necessary for him to engage in dialogue with the living. In retaining flesh, he retains a *virtus* and a potency realized here not as any physical prowess (as in the narrative of 'The Hanged Man's Revenge', but to some extent as an intellectual vigour to match the probing of St Erkenwald, though, as we will witness later, even an invisible form can engage in robust dialogue with a learned inquisitor, as in the *Gast of Gy* (below, Chapter 3).

[39] On the London cult of Erkenwald see Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition*.

The preserved corpse here is expressly not to be deemed a revenant in the true sense of the word. He returns only to a people who do not recognize him, centuries later, like the bickering corpses of Lydgate's *Legend of St Austin* (above). His pagan contemporaries would not have understood the Christian theological testimony he is charged to give. The miracle of preservation allows a dignity and tangibility of image to the figure of the dead man in the poet's design. As in iconographic renditions of Paradise, the blessed are figured as clothed in the finest array of their office; nudity is reserved for the damned. This corpse is from the outset, though anonymous, to be accorded the status of a wonder, readily distinguishable from the routine excavation of dry bones habitual to medieval churches. The miracle as physically figured here too is far more realistically and decorously conceived than that of a grotesque living tongue still pulsating in its bare skull, as witnessed in the possible source legend of Jacopo della Lana, even if, ultimately, all the corpse in *Erkenwald* is charged to be is simply a 'tongue'; a mouthpiece to yield testimony to the grace of God.

The poet is careful to prepare the regulatory protocols for the miraculous speech of the corpse. Such a marvel is shown to be divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, and not as the result of the corpse retaining life over the passing centuries of his own volition. The corpse's ability to speak is the fruit of Erkenwald's vigil on the night of the body's invention, in which he prays that God might through some 'visoun or elles' assist the saint to understand '[t]he mysterie of this mervaille that men opon wonders' (l. 121). The immaculate body is therefore a sign whose meaning can be unlocked only through divine inspiration. The miracle of conversation with the dead is not to be received as a marvel in itself, but as a necessary explanation of an access of divine grace: the admission of a soul, in baptism *after* mortal death, to Heaven.

The corpse, though preserved in body, has not retained life. The semblance of life is restored only at Erkenwald's conjuring of the body, which must in turn be answered vocally. Erkenwald demands, since they cannot determine themselves, that the body identify itself, account for its present state, tell how long it has lain dead, and crucially, whether it is brought to pain or joy in the afterlife (ll. 185–88). As the saint finishes his invocation, the corpse is gently infused with a slurred half-life, in an intriguingly precise and evocative description by the poet:

> The bryght body in the burynes [*burial place*] brayed [*stirred*] a litell,
> And with a drery dreme [*voice*] he drives owte wordes
> Thurgh sum lant goste-lyfe of hym that al redes.
>
> (ll. 190–92)

Implicitly, the dead man's soul is not restored to his preserved body. At best a simulation of a soul, some *goste-lyfe* lent by God animates him while his spirit serves its sentence elsewhere. The corpse is not accorded further description in its speech — it remains in its tomb (l. 217) and seems not to open its eyes, or even its mouth. The dead man states he is a pagan judge who died 1,054 years ago, one who ruled his city in the most enlightened and just way (l. 216). In spite of the lawlessness of his people he was an inscrutable judge, impervious to bribery or rash judgement. His people, accordingly, buried him as a king (ll. 231–45). Responding to the saint, the body (proudly) confirms his material remains stay imperishable not through embalming, but through the grace of 'the riche kyng of reson' (l. 267). His soul, he concedes to the saint's questioning, fares worse (at which his mood worsens): 'Than hummyd he that ther lay and his hedde waggyd, | And gefe a gronyng ful grete' (ll. 281–82). He explicitly states, despite his body's outward appearance of beatitude that 'we myste [*must be*] alle merciless, myselfe and my soule' (l. 299). Not of the number brought out in Hell's Harrowing, his spirit in the cold wilderness of Limbo hungers for the heavenly banquet (ll. 305–07).

The poet strongly emphasizes the display of compassion from the onlookers who 'stille as the ston' hear the body's speech (l. 219). From awe and fear of an impassive, indestructible corpse, and mass consternation at the sight of the mysterious dead, they dissolve with pity in hearing the wan-voiced dead man speak of his former life, long spent (l. 220). 'Thus dulfully this dede body devisyt hit sorowe | That alle wepyd for woo the wordes that herden' (ll. 309–10). The restoration of temporary life to the corpse required a deliberate invocation from the saint. The body's apotheosis is brought about in an altogether different formulation. Erkenwald, as filled with pity as the rest, cannot absolve the dead judge of the original sin which excludes him from Heaven — yet he wishes it were so, desiring that only for one moment the man might genuinely return to life long enough that he might baptize him and cleanse him of original sin (ll. 315–20). It is now a saintly wish, not a command, which is fulfilled:

> With that word he warped [*uttered*], the wete of his eghen
> And teres trillyd [*trickled*] adoun and on the toumbe lighten [*landed*],
> And one fell on his face, and the freke [*man*] syked [*sighed*].
> (ll. 321–23)

This inadvertent baptism of tears restores full life to the corpse in the moment that it anoints. The corpse is no longer the mere 'body' as he has been referred to up to now. No longer animated with a mere 'lent ghost-life', it sighs with restored

breath, so that the dead judge can at last be described as a man — *freke* (Whatley, pp. 335–36). Breath implies the presence of a soul; expiration at death (the last breath), always denoted the soul's departure from the body. Here the body of the Judge is still incomplete in this regard. Though living, he lives only to inform his benefactor that his soul, still parted from his body, has been taken in rapture to the Holy Feast as a consequence of his baptism. The living body of the man is sustained now only to give testimony of his salvation and record his praise to he who has delivered him there (ll. 324–32). Its role completed, it yields to the decay denied it for a millennium:

> Wyt this cessyd his sowne [*voice*], sayd he no more,
> Bot sodenly his swete chere swyndid [*faded*] and faylid
> And all the blee of his body wos blakke as the moldes,
> As rotten as the rottok [*corruption*] that rises in powdere.
> For as sone as the soule was sesyd in blisse,
> Corrupt was that othir craft that covert the bones [*the flesh*],
> For the ay-lastande life that lethe [*fades*] shall never
> Devoydes uche a vayneglorie that vayles so litelle.
>
> (ll. 341–48)

A central irony of the pulverization of the corpse is that this decay is now a sign of life; the providence that never fails now permits mortal flesh to fail, in a sign of the pagan Judge's acceptance into Christianity. The poet is careful to emphasize the significance of the destruction of the body, whose rapid putrefaction is almost cinematic, narrated in 'slow motion'. There are separate, discernable stages to the transformation, and the verbal detail of the poet's description hints at an awareness of the clinical process of the decay of bodies (a process noted in detail in Chapter 1) and of the perverse delicacy with which it can be represented in tomb art and iconography in the macabre idiom. A first stage of putrefaction is marked by the blackening of the flesh, after the pallor sustained in the moment of 'death'. It is now as blackened as the mould which *could* grow on it (but has not yet). Line 345 seems somewhat garbled but indicates broadly that the body is now as corrupt as any that has been reduced to ashes. It is inferred finally that the body has been reduced to a skeleton with some carious flesh still covering it (l. 349).

The role of the revenant here is somewhat different from those we have already witnessed. Through a dialogue with the living, a dead individual in distress is succoured — this is indeed familiar — but the text relates the dilemma of a dead man who suffers only from what no-one in the audience would have suffered, the absence of baptism. At issue is not so much an anxiety of the destination of all dead but of the virtuous heathen, a problem much rehearsed in medieval religious

discourse.[40] The text has been interpreted alternately as 'theologically conservative' in its insistence on the importance of the sacraments for salvation, or by contrast as 'a kind of humanist tract' in allowing salvation merely through the dead man's inherent virtue — a mode of interpretation witnessed in the writings of Langland and Wyclif in regard to the salvation of the soul of Emperor Trajan. Whatley cites these opposing views, holding strongly with the former, 'conservative' interpretation. He argues not only is the text 'a conservative and defensive response to the markedly secular character of the Gregory/Trajan story in the medieval period' but also a broadside against 'the liberal scholastic theology concerning the righteous heathen in general, which was adapted [...] by Langland and Wyclif'. The text, however, appears to have had little subsequent impact either on the promulgation of the legends of Trajan or Erkenwald.[41] It nonetheless borrows recognizable attributes from other narratives of tomb discovery (*inventio*), where pagan tombs long buried are uncovered and found graven with writings prophesying the events of the Gospels, and often stating too that those inhumed therein have been admitted into Paradise for their belief in the coming of Christ.[42] Indeed, 'bryght golde lettres' are found on the dead judge's tomb in *St Erkenwald*, but shown ultimately to be meaningless: 'roynyshe were the resones that ther on row stoden' (ll. 51–52). This heathen suffers immeasurably until the intercession of a Christian saint.[43] His virtue has preserved only his body, not his soul (always referred to in the third-person feminine in this text). His reputation, once alive among his people, is as good as dead in the Christian present, which has no memory of him. Only he can speak of it when invoked, long after death. Pagan fame withers as all earthly matter — only a preserved corpse, long hidden, remains as testament to its vanity. His only reward for being an exemplary pagan is a material one — a body preserved out of all ending.[44]

The poet of *St Erkenwald* is fully aware of the horror and dramatic potential of the sight of the macabre cadaver, and its juxtaposition with the hitherto immaculate, supernaturally preserved flesh of the dead man is acutely conveyed. An epitome of beauty in death, he finally becomes as corrupt as any of the Christian

[40] On this general theme, see Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition*, and Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints'.

[41] Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints', pp. 332–33, 345, 361.

[42] *St Erkenwald*, headnote, p. 201, Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition*, pp. 183–86.

[43] Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints', p. 350.

[44] Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints', p. 361.

dead should be. The Judge's dissolution represents a dramatic climax to the dialogue between the living and the dead, and marks the point where the subject leaves the reach of the living. Yet the realization in the macabre idiom of the passage of all flesh rehearses a consolatory message: bodily corruption marks a release into a (potential) heavenly reward. The beatific judge goes to bliss despite the ignominious ending of his remains. Corruption is in this context transformed from the punitive glossing of the *contemptus mundi* as indicative of moral corruption to, here, an index of moral health. The ever-lasting life to which he has been joined obviates the maintenance of his physical glory on earth.[45] Denied for a time natural corruption as well as the justice of salvation, the figure of the judge is an illustration of the consequences of the good death, however delayed. His bodily dissolution emphatically denotes his spiritual resurrection.

St Erkenwald anticipates one issue which will be examined in the next chapter, the debate of the Body and Soul. In the body of the Judge's lament for the loss of his soul in limbo, the text echoes the rhetoric of *The Gast of Gy* who, explicitly fashioned as a spiritual, incorporeal revenant (a disembodied soul), castigates the body from which he has been parted (see Chapter 3, below). The most outstanding debate on the theme in Middle English, 'Als I Lay', will also be examined in the next chapter in determining the visual and rhetorical strategies in this intellectual division of the dead into Body and Soul.

In its acute efforts towards a narrative realism in representing the dead in a literary mode of intellectual and theological inquisition, *St Erkenwald* also complements *The Gast of Gy*'s explicit inquisitory and diagnostic mode of narration. The talking dead are rigorously brought within the boundaries of orthodox theological discourse in these two texts. The dead are also carefully described with a marked tone of realism. All extravagant gestures — such as the subject leaving its grave or touching its interlocutors — are eschewed in both *St Erkenwald* and *The Gast of Gy*. Existing without his soul, the body of the Judge must be seen to remain unanimated, incapable of motion and of nothing other than the most feeble speech in a sombre, naturalistic realism. Similarly *The Gast of Gy*'s incorporeality is the subject of exhaustive disquisition in the text, all the more thorough for the ghost's intangibility. Whatever the physical constraints upon the dead, their testimony vocalizes the realities of the hereafter for the audience in more detail than an audience of the tales from the collections we have been documenting could perhaps ever want.

[45] Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints', pp. 347–48.

From the startling incursions of the dead in the derivatives of *The Golden Legend* to Mirk's accounts of the theory of possession and its less careful exemplification in Lydgate and the *Gesta Romanorum*, we have seen modes which sustain both the application of the macabre idiom to clothe their appearance, and its eschewal. The dead, in Middle English narrative, can be wielded with psychological drama and energy without any prescriptive visual model being introduced into the narrative, as we have seen in 'The Hanged Man's Revenge' and *An Alphabet of Tales*. These have been the dead who still use their bodies. The next chapter will examine those who do not.

The Emperor Hadrian to his Soul, AD *138*

Animula vagula blandula,
Hospes comesque corporis,
Quae nunc abibis in loca
Pallidula rigida nudula,
Nec ut soles dabis iocos!

—*The Oxford Book of Latin Verse*

(Little Soul so sleek and smiling
Flesh's friend and guest also,
Where departing will you wander
Growing paler now and languid,
And not joking as you used to?)

—*Roman Poets of the Early Empire*

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked and charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee.

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Chapter 3

Farewell to the Flesh: Disembodying the Dead

The second-century apostrophe to his own soul attributed to Emperor Hadrian on his death (see above) underscores one aspect of the representation of the incorporeal body: verbal presentation can do nothing to concretize a subject which, by its presumed nature, must be nebulous and intangible. The perception of the dead in their disembodied state is as common a mode of representing them in medieval literature as their ostensive apparition in their mortal bodies. Though often appearing in the rationalizing context of a dream or vision, these 'spiritual' apparitions are not confined to formal examples of the genre of the dream-vision or spiritual vision, long the narrative vehicle for the sudden interruption into everyday life of the otherworldly, with scriptural models in Ezekiel and St John the Divine.[1] Yet, however much these narratives relate the direct revelation of supernatural truths (usually to a visionary figure in first-person narration), these accounts of the dead are generally nowhere as absorbed in the definition of the process of spiritual sight as mystical authors such as Julian of Norwich, who at all times emphasizes the non-dreaming but nonetheless internal nature of her spiritual seeing in her *Revelations of Divine Love*.

Thus, in spite of the latent complexity of the spiritual nature of the revenant dead, most Middle English accounts do not explore how these spirits are 'substantiated'. We have seen this reluctance to define the dead already in Chapters 1 and 2, above. The dead, in whatever appearance they make, are generally taken on their own terms by a nonchalant narrator and an audience implicitly satisfied with a degree of mystery or inexplicability in the evocation of the dead. Yet a

[1] Helen Philips and Nick Havely, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry* (Harlow: Longman, 1987), p. 7.

further caveat needs to be made in regard to the kinds of representation we are about to examine — the imagery of such spiritual, incorporeal apparitions of the dead is not, clearly, inflected by the macabre visual idiom as some of the examples seen hitherto — and it is the macabre, and the way in which the dead can be positioned in relation to this cultural phenomenon which is the focus of this book. Yet these incorporeal dead are intended, independently of imagery derived from the corruption of the body, to stimulate the same range of responses in the audience (internal and external to the narratives) as witnessed already; these too are crucial models for gauging medieval poetic engagement with, and response to, the dead; and, as we have seen already, the most insubstantive, incorporeal dead man of later medieval literature, the ghost of Guy, becomes, as testified by William Dunbar in his *Flyting* (see above, Chapter 1), a byword for the evocation of the dead, just like his 'macabre', physical counterpart, Lazarus. It is the literary life of the species of dead that should not be seen, the ones that repudiate the language of bodily corruption (corruption which *must* be seen, in its homiletic tradition), to which we now turn, in the shapeless configuration of the Ghost of Guy, and the literary tradition 'he' operates in: the medieval dialogue of the Body and Soul.

The Debate of the Soul and the Body

The poetic difficulties inherent in the imaginative, verbal, rhetorical, and scientific realization of the dead in narratives where the corpse cannot to be used as the sole imaginative model, is obvious. These difficulties are emphasized only by their elision in the thirteenth-century Middle English dialogue of the Body and the Soul 'Als I Lay', which for us, must serve as the paradigm for the figuration of the 'body of the soul' in Middle English narratives of the dead — a choice mandated by the text's evident popularity among medieval audiences, which, even for a popular genre, is exceptional for its survival in seven manuscripts — more than any other *debate* poem (on any theme) in Middle English. The text of 'Als I Lay', as well as being derived from medieval Latin models, represents an expansion of another, shorter Middle English Body and Soul dialogue of the same period, the *carmen inter corpus et animam* (beginning, in English 'In a thestri stude' — in a dark place).[2] The fact that both texts are distributed in some of the most

[2] 'In a thestri stude' (*carmen inter corpus et animam*), in *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by John W. Conlee (East Lansing: Colleagues, 1991), pp. 10–17. According to

important vernacular manuscript anthologies of the early Middle English period (the shorter in MS Harley 2253 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86, and Cambridge, Trinity College, MS 323), and that the longer 'Als I lay' has one of its witnesses in the hugely important fourteenth-century manuscript of English romance and other genres in the Auchinleck manuscript (National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19. 2. 1), indicates the widespread appeal of these exemplary adventures in death.[3] In other words, 'Als I Lay', based on existing manuscript evidence alone, could have been the narrative model of the dead most read by English audiences. The survival of the later *Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, in English, in only one manuscript, may indicate, by contrast, that the original appeal of this text, closely aligned as it is with a modish iconography, was more restricted relative to the earlier debate poem which still intercalates the aspects of the bodily language of the *contemptus mundi* trope with the less visually contingent representation of the soul.

The subject of the English debate, 'Als I Lay' — the overheard conversations between the bifurcated Body and Soul in death — is experienced in an ostensive *chanson d'aventure* mode by an anonymous narrator, but its setting in a generic, rationalizing context — the dream vision — is more tenuous. In the opening lines we are told the narrator *lies* in darkness, amid which he sees a body awaiting burial and overhears this mortuary colloquy of Body and Soul (l. 2). Whatever the rationale for the narrator's presence (whether a dreamer, or a waking mourner keeping vigil), he, like the initializing first-person narrator of *The Three Dead* (see below, Chapter 5) is quickly effaced from his narrative, returning in a narrative coda only at the end of 'Als I Lay' and never to return at all in the text of the *Carmen*. This latter narrator is verifiably 'awake' — he 'stands' in a dark place, eavesdropping the 'luitel strif' between 'bodi' and 'gost' (ll. 1–3).

Robert W. Ackerman, 'The Debate of the Body and Soul and Parochial Christianity', *Speculum*, 37 (1962), 541–65 (p. 544), the main sources of the longer text, 'Als I Lay' would appear likely to be two Latin Body and Soul debates from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries: the earlier, from BL, MS Royal 7 A. iii, with the later text, ascribed to the English theologian Robert Grosseteste, closer to the Middle English 'Als I Lay'. This source text, *Noctis sub silencio* (also known as the *Visio Philiberti*), appears to have been very well known, surviving in over 130 manuscripts.

[3] 'Als I Lay in a Winteris Nyt', in *Middle English Debate Poetry*, ed. by Conlee, pp. 18–49 (p. 18). Conlee bases his critical text of 'Als I Lay' on the versions in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108 and the Auchinleck manuscript (MS Adv. 19. 2. 1). 'In a Dark Place' is edited by Conlee from MS Digby 86.

Holding both categories of the dead — spiritual and corporeal — before the audience, 'Als I Lay' deploys a rudimentary, provisional vocabulary to arrive at a notional evocation of the somatic properties of Body and Soul as separate entities. The text provides, nonetheless, nothing resembling a systematic and *varied* lexicon which evaluates the qualities of the dead as either body and spirit. The corpse is consistently referred to simply as 'body', the soul as 'ghost'. Whatever the somatic or lifelike properties of both, they fall within the perceptive abilities of the speaker — a persona styled as an eavesdropper to a debate. The body, of course, presents a far less problematic theme for verbal realization in comparison to the soul. In 'Als I Lay', it is described for the audience not by the narrator, but pejoratively by the soul in debate. In rhetoric imitative of the *contemptus mundi*, but inflected by the homely language of everyday (even fraternal) fltying, it is mocked by the soul in 'Als I Lay' as having become 'bollen as a bite' — swollen as a leatherskin (l. 204). Such animosity is later offset by an extensive section of reconciliatory dialogue, couched in the language of fraternal love, as both entities share the blame for their perdition (ll. 297–384). Here, in an effort to concretely imagine two related entities, we implicitly arrive at the most practical familial analogue: Soul as older and wiser brother, and Body as feckless younger sibling — an exemplary narrative of death softened in the domestic rhetoric of intimacy. The body affectingly sketches their relationship in language not out of place in the brotherly discourse of dynastic romance, as the soul rues its ever having spared the rod:

> Of a wymman born and bredde,
> Body, were we bothe two;
> Togidre fostrid fayre and fedde
> Til thou couthest speke and go.
> Softe the for love I ledde.
> Ne dorste I neuere do the wo;
> To lese the so sore I dredde.
> (ll. 297–303)

> (Of one woman born and bred,
> We were both, Body
> Together fostered well and fed
> Till you could speak and walk
> I guided you indulgently.
> I feared to upset you;
> I was afraid to lose you.)

Nonetheless, of the two aspects of the deceased, the body is the most readily imagined. It tests the audience's unaided imagination far more to determine the outward appearance, or what Robert Ackerman terms the 'sensible cortex' of the soul. 'Als I Lay' indeed appears initially to defer to the description of the corpse in place of the spirit. The former falls within human experience, the latter remains outside it, and outside too of the poet's lexical frame of reference, even though the soul enjoyed a very concrete mode of visualization in medieval art as a miniature homunculus in the iconography of the *ars moriendi*. The iconography of the naked soul is simply a version of the glorified body of the iconography of the Last Judgement familiar to medieval audiences from church iconography (whether sculptural, mural, or glass) where the naked, glorified dead rise to accept judgement.[4] 'Als I Lay', if concerned with a 'fresh corpse', still describes, in the macabre idiom, a body well on its way towards putrefying. The fact that the poem illustrates two states of man — physical and spiritual — at a posthumous judgement would have reinforced audiences' imaginative expectations of the possible visual configurations of Body and Soul in this context. Some (depending on the iconographic programmes available in the churches they frequented) would have witnessed portrayals of wholly and partially en-fleshed bodies at judgement, though this would have constituted purely a cosmetic dichotomy: there would have been no material, doctrinal divorce between Body and Soul in the context of the iconography of the Doom, as both were to be reunited at the Last Judgement.[5] Nevertheless, this variety of the forms of the rising dead would have suggested a way for audiences to imagine the debating protagonists at the heart of 'Als I Lay'; even though at essence the poem is not a debate at resurrection, but a dispute between the parts of a dead man who is emphatically not being restored to glory before the face of God.

In 'Als I Lay', the narrator's perspective of the corpse is initially that of the dead man as a single, lifeless, yet integrated, entity. It is not, in a manner somewhat akin to what Hamlet's gravedigger would later say, a man, but someone who was *once* a man — a body:

> That hauede ben a mody knight,
> And litel serued God to pay;

[4] See Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image*, trans. by Dora Nussey (London: Dutton, 1913), p. 375.

[5] A fascinating source of medieval English church art is assembled by Anne Marshall at <http://www.paintedchurch.org/> [accessed September 2010]

> Loren he haued the liues lyght
> the gost was out and scholde away.
> (ll. 4–8)
>
> (That had been a strong knight,
> And revered God little;
> He had lost the light of life
> His ghost was out and would away.)

From an inert, integrated corpse, the deceased is quickly split into two active entities, effectively two dramatic personae, a body and a ghost. Life is deemed an essence absent from both Body and Soul; the animating force of the dead man is not seemingly conceived as his 'ghost'; but as an unstated, ineffable essence — a 'light' of life that cannot be restored by either party, no matter how long the reluctant soul hovers around the body. Prior, indeed, to its seizure by demons (ll. 497–608), the soul is suggested most strongly as that which is impossibly intangible — an unheeded conscience, too weak to alter the actions of the body it loved too much in brotherhood (ll. 433–40).

Both parties — Body and Soul — seem to borrow the 'lent ghost-life' that *St Erkenwald*'s dead judge bears (see above, Chapter 2). Despite this, the soul's representation rests on its articulation as an emotional figure suffused with very human degrees of regret, so that even if the 'ghost's' properties are not registered visibly, they are anthropomorphically suggestive of humanity: it bears the gestures of a man, if not explicitly the appearance. It is first 'seen' as a figure that at first could be mistaken for a mourner of the corpse on the bier:

> Wan the gost it scholde go,
> Yt biwente and withstood [*it vacillated and waited*],
> Bihelod the body there it cam fro,
> So serfulli with dredli mod [*sorrowfully with dreadful cheer*].
> It seide, 'Weile and walawo!' [*It said, 'alas and alack!'*]
> (ll. 9–13)

The soul, of course, mourns for itself, and the ensuing dialogue is a dispute between Body and Soul as to who is more to blame in leading the dead man on the bier into sin — the body's lusts, or the soul's willingness to succumb — standard Pauline rhetoric from the Christian discourse of the dichotomy of Body and Soul. The body joins in the debate once the soul completes its opening tirade. In a pleasingly ghoulish motif reminiscent of popular accounts of the dead such as 'The Hanged Man's Revenge' of the *Gesta Romanorum* (above, Chapter 2), the dead body stirs into motion in response to the soul's invective:

The bodi ther it lay on bere,
A gastlich thing as it was on,
Lift vp his heiud opon the swere [*neck*]
As it were sik it gan to gron
& sayd 'Whether thou art mi fere,
Mi gost that is fro me gon?
(ll. 139–44)

The body is reanimated with the same suggestive movement witnessed in *St Erkenwald* (see above, Chapter 2). The soul responds to the body's argument with the same invective against the decaying body (accentuated by the energy of debate) witnessed later in Dunbar's *Flyting* (above, Chapter 1). Here, as before, the body's horrible appearance aligns it with medieval discourse on ugliness and physical opprobrium. The body's whole future is encapsulated in microcosm, commencing as rotting flesh, concluding as dust:

Wenestough, wretche, thogh though fille
Wid thi foule fleichs a pite,
Of all dedes though didest ille
That though so litel schalt be quite?
Wenestou nou gete the grith [*do you expect now to have relief*]
Ther though list rotten in the clay?
They though be rotten pile [*skin*] and pith [*inside*]
And blowen with the wind away,
Yeot schaltough come with lime [*limb*] and lyth [*joint*]
Agein to me on domesday.
(ll. 205–14)

Later, as the soul concludes its tirade against the body's misrule in life, it taunts the body in the stench of its decay and the macabre *rictus* of rigor mortis upon its face — 'so lodly [*loathly*] though list grenne [*grin*] — | Fro the cometh a wikke wef [*whiff*]' (ll. 247–48). In rhetorically imagined apparition, the soul remarks how few of his friends would run to greet him looking as he is now: 'Though ne hauest frend that ne wolde fle, | Come though stertlinde in the street!' (ll. 255–56). The body's foetid appearance is one of the soul's principal themes, and its main rhetorical means to excoriate it. This is a strategy reflective of the reflexes of the *contemptus mundi*, and also the dramatization of the Pauline opposition of the spirit to the body. The spirit, in this mode, is arguably the entity most apt to belittle the flesh. Yet this rhetoric of self-abomination is pursued also by the speaking body in a gesture of self-abnegation. Its acknowledged decay is a material

consequence of the absence of the soul from it in death and also symbolizes the absence of the control which the soul should have exercised over it in life:

> That thou ne were and red roun [*Without you there to give counsel*]
> Nuuere did I thing ne spac [*Never did I act or speak* [under your influence]];
> Here the soothe se men mouen
> On me that ligge here so blo and blac.
> [...]
> Lodely chaunced [*foul-changed*] is my chere
> Sin the tyme that though me let [*left*].
>
> (ll. 269–72, 277–78)

This is a corpse painfully aware of its transformation in death — it accurately describes the bruising and mottling of the skin in the immediate aftermath of death (see Chapter 1, above), complementing the soul's scorn of its swollenness at line 204. This is a penitent self-awareness of bodily corruption shared by the revenant dead of *Sir Amadace* (above, Chapter 1), *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms* (below, Chapter 4), and *The Three Dead* and *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (below, Chapter 5). The body's 'blackness' too is one of the principal horrors in the mind of Guinevere, who sees the revenant corpse of her mother in *Awntyrs.*

Thus, the debate, ostensibly descriptive of both the body and of the soul, becomes at least initially a more biased representation of the moribund body. Just as the human soul is ordinarily concealed within the human body, here any effort at the literary approximation of the appearance of the soul goes unassayed until the debate's coda, when it is 'physically' dragged away from the body into Hell by demons. In these earlier sections of the debate, the soul is wholly obscured by the almost aromatic description applied to the decaying corpse, whose horrific appearance in death becomes the chief focus of admonition in the text until the realization of the soul's punishment. No such horror can be registered exclusively with the imagined appearance of the soul (at least while unmolested by otherwordly horrors). It is an entity that (at the risk of stating the obvious) cannot exhibit the corruption of the body it has left behind. The body thus (logically) takes upon itself all the natural, physical consequences of death; the soul adopts the otherworldly consequences — an eschatological, visionary, two-for the price-of one exemplary adventure. The soul's recurrent iconographic frame of reference in medieval art which we have mentioned above — an ageless, miniature (often nude), figure — cannot be interpreted adequately unless framed in certain dramatic, visual contexts: a deathbed scene, or a judgement scene. In 'Als I Lay' the soul is visibly registered only in its being tortured. This accords it the contours of a body, since it is only here, in a posture of torture rehearsed in countless medieval

visions of the Otherworld, that it now has jaws which can be forced open and force-fed hot lead (ll. 513–14), and a heart that can be transfixed with a hot poker (ll. 519–20). It now has body into which knives can be inserted; in its 'bac, bresten and bothe sides' (l. 522). An aristocratic hunter in life, he (it) is mauled with due irony by demonic hunting dogs (l. 557), forced to wear a mantle of flame (l. 532), and to sit astride a demon horse with a saddle of spikes (l. 542), until brought to the mouth of Hell, which opens to receive him (ll. 571–73).

The body remains a familiar and redundant vehicle of (and in its decay, symbol of) sin. Its ostensible 'escape' from punishment is a theme which is realized to a greater extent in a more extensive dialogue of the living and of the soul in *The Gast of Gy*, which will be examined below. There, as will be seen, however, is no rejoinder from the body to lament the soul's negligence in permitting the body to sin; dialogue is once more resumed between living and dead, and not simply between the two parts of man.

The Spiritual Body in Middle English Narratives

The appearance of the dead as spirit, as we have seen in the dialogue of the Body and Soul 'Als I Lay', is motivated by the didactic requirement to represent the separation of the body and the soul as a consequence of death. Here, the soul's literary appearance implicitly registers on a mimetic level as a human body, a vehicle which will withstand (perpetually, if need be), the punishment meted out to it in the hereafter. The purgatories and hells of the apocryphal New Testament, which supplied the thematic material and somatic models for the dead in the corpus of medieval visions of the Otherworld, must constitute places where the souls of the dead (the only lasting part of the deceased), recognizably suffer the consequences of the bad death, *mors improvisa*.

If, then, it is the second death — the soul's abduction into Hell — which we have seen above, it is the 'birth' of the soul which is depicted for the audience where the English visionary Edmund Leversedge recounts his own temporary 'death' in May 1465 in Frome, Somerset, causing his vision of Purgatory.[6] He relates in his testimony the passing of his soul from his body, imagined as a

[6] Extant only in BL, MS Additional 34193, a manuscript much concerned with visions of the afterlife, containing a Latin text of *Spiritus Guidonis* and Middle English texts of the *Pèlerinage de L'âme*, and the Vision of St Patrick's Purgatory, *The Vision of William of Stranton*. Edition used is *The Vision of Edmund Leversedge*, ed. by W. F. Nijenhuis (Nijmegen: Nijmegen Catholic University Centre for Medieval Studies, 1991).

miniature of the corporeal body. Here the soul struggles for birth like a foetus; the mouth acts as the soul's birth canal:

> First my seyd sawle was mevyd and rapte from the inward parte of my body unto my mowth and returned agen from the mouth into the inward part of my body that it furst remevyd from. And then from that inward part out of my mowthe unto a grene close, as hit had byn a kyrkyerde. (pp. 97–103)

This posture of the homuncular soul slithering out of *moriens'* mouth is no less a topos indebted to iconography than is the configuration of the macabre cadaver. In a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de l'âme* (Leiden University Library, MS BPL 74, fol. 92^{r}) we see the archetypal posture of the soul at mortal death.[7] The expiration of the soul (the *animula vagula* addressed by Hadrian) is attended by a macabre cadaver personifying death and the future decay of the body, joined by a black devil typifying the threat of torture for the soul. The text of *Leversedge* offers us a precise verbal formulation of the iconographic expulsion of the soul, and its narrative too accompanies the soul on its journey. Upon being spat out of the dying body, the soul of Edmund arrives in an otherwordly place conceived in morbid verisimilitude as a churchyard — the afterlife here taking its cue from the material destination of the body in the graveyard.[8] Proceeding, as in the earlier *Vision of Tundale* (see below) and the St Patrick's Purgatory visions of *Owain Mile*s and *William of Stranton* under the guidance of a psychopomp — a guardian angel — he arrives in a 'valley' whereupon, in a standard motif of these visions, his soul is assailed by demons with all the signs of a physical body undergoing a physical assault by a mob (a mode already seen in 'Als I Lay', above):

> And they toke my sowle, sum by the leggis, sum by the armes, sum by the hed, sum drawing my sawle on way and sum another, and glad was that develle that onys might towche hit to do hit payn. (pp. 132–35)

Thus, the souls of the dead unmistakably strive for somatic solidity in their afterlife — a necessary imaginative device witnessed as a topos from the fourth-century Pauline Apocrypha to Dante and the Dialogue of the Body and Soul, above. Yet this surface integrity of the incorporeal soul, its imitation of the living body — its somatomorphism, as described by Caroline Walker Bynum — mirrors Christian

[7] Illustrated in Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 221.

[8] The most recent editor of *Leversedge* arrives at this interpretation also, remarking that such a 'locus is not found in other Middle English visions. Its appearance here may be due to the interest the late Middle Ages had in the macabre, of which churchyards formed an essential part' (*The Vision of Edmund Leversedge*, p. 23).

doctrine concerning the unity of the soul, which, after Aristotelian thought, held that a soul was a complete entity in itself, not a fragment of a person. The soul's is a surface integrity which suffers a literal, physical, and not a psychological fire, according to theologians such as Aquinas and William de la Mare.[9] The soul held all the faculties, virtues, and vices of the person to whom it belonged. Accordingly, it was not in any way to be deemed a reduction of the living person — it justifiably bears all the punishments accorded to 'the person' in death (save decomposition). Replicating its faculties and senses, it must therefore replicate the body's appearance.

Yet any scientific assessment of the somatic properties of the incorporeal dead is not readily witnessed in Middle English narratives, and certainly not in literary modes outside the visionary and expressly didactic. As the subject of the composition of the soul is a complex one, most writers of popular literature would have happily avoided it. Just as *Sir Amadace* (above, Chapter 1) is unconcerned with classifying the physical nature of the white revenant (whose body the audience knows has been buried) amid elements suggestive of belief in a fairy folk transcending the human, so too does the romance *Sir Orfeo* (an early fourteenth-century English transformation of the myth of Orpheus) deny the perfect distinction between the body and the soul. It liquefies any imagined boundaries between intangible but perpetual soul, and solid but soluble flesh in the construction of a sense of indefinable somatic cohesion after death. Here, both the living and the dead cross the boundary of life and death into the Otherworld, some bodily, some 'spiritually'. Herodis (this medieval narrative's transformation of Eurydice) has been rapt in soul (not body) to the Otherworld prior to her *bodily* abduction. *Sir Orfeo*, a markedly secularized romance, bound, in its earliest manuscript witness — the Auchinleck manuscript — with more exemplary narratives and secular romances, offers, in a secular idiom, the narrative formula of the voyage of the soul with which medieval audiences were plentifully served. By way of warning of impending 'death', Herodis is taken in a dream to the fairy realm on the eve of her actual physical abduction, where she is abducted in body and soul.

The Fairy King's realm (this text's Celtic-inflected version of Pluto's Underworld) contains too all those he has abducted bodily: some in their prime of life, and others whilst in their throes of death. Some of these victims he has himself, implicitly 'killed', by his own hand, not merely kidnapped. As Orfeo begins to survey the interior of the fairy castle, the narrator relates:

[9] Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 281.

Than he gan bihold about al,
And seighe liggeand within the wal
Of folk that were thider y-brought
And thought dede, and nare nought.
Sum stode withouten hade,
And sum non armes nade,
And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,
And sum lay wode, y-bounde.[10]

(Then he began to see about him,
And saw lying within the wall
Folk that were hither brought
And who were thought dead, but were not.
Some stood without their heads,
And some had no arms,
And some had bodies transfixed by wounds,
And some lay bound in madness.)

These dead (*wode, y-bounde*) implicitly bear the signs of violent resistance against abduction by the White King. As his earlier warning to Heurodis made clear, any resistance would see her taken to his realm, not alive, but in pieces:

And yif thou makest ous y-let,
Whar thou be, thou worst y-fet,
And totore thine limes al
That nothing help the no schal;
And thei thou best so totorn,
Yete thou worst with ous y-born.
(ll. 145–50)

And if you hinder us,
Wherever you end up, you will be found,
And torn from limb to limb
So that no help will avail you;
And even if you end up so dismembered,
You will still be taken away by us.

[10] *Sir Orfeo*, ed. by A. J. Bliss, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), ll. 363–70; subsequent citations of *Sir Orfeo* refer to this edition, cited in the text by line number; translations are mine.

This house of the dead which constitutes the Fairy King's keep is thus a curious assemblage of those taken in violence and those taken seemingly in the throes of a natural death. Yet, in this world, those 'thought dead' are not dead. *Sir Orfeo*'s artistic ambiguities centre on the identity and role of the dead, and the purpose behind their abduction — a purpose of course which is wonderfully lacking in the text. Like the patterns of the narrative itself, these ambiguous dead are a source of pleasure: internally for the Fairy King, and externally for an audience's delight and horror. These dead are arranged aesthetically, even erotically, for the pleasure of the King — a collector of beautiful bodies which he assembles into a perverted Terrestrial Paradise, and these bodies too are an artistic frieze of the postures of *mors improvisa*, now arranged in an underworld, and indeed a universe, where no sin is necessary to secure admittance to a torturing Otherworld:

> And sum armed on hors sete [*sat*],
> And sum astrangled as thai ete [*ate*];
> And sum were in water adreynt [*drowned*],
> And sum with fire al forschreynt [*destroyed*].
> Wives ther lay on childe bedde,
> Sum ded and sum awedde [*mad*],
> And wonder fele [*many*] ther lay bisides
> Right as thai slepe her undertides [*right as they slept at midday*];
> Eche was thus in this warld y-nome [*each was thus into this world taken*],
> With fairi thider y-come [*come there with the faerie*].
>
> (ll. 371–80)

Yet, inasmuch as this appears a species of Hell reserved for those who do not appear to have sinned, it can appear also to be a Purgatory for which the only suffrages needed to secure the release of souls are courtly song, realized in the singing of Orfeo; courtly honour, not expiated sin, in the Fairy King's granting of Herodis as minstrel's fee to Orfeo, dictates her release. Still further, this is an underworld where the sins of the dead are not documented, and the potential allegorical sonorities (mandated by the medieval commentary tradition on Orpheus) of the Fairy King (Satan), Orfeo (Christ, or Intellect), Herodis (Desire), are all utterly neglected to the preferment of the narrative of entertainment, and indeed, enchantment.[11]

[11] On the Orpheus commentary tradition, see John B. Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

The Fairy King too is an ambiguous, diffuse accretion of the attributes of a rapacious otherworldly king, an Underworld deity in the classical mode, an avatar of Death, and of the Christian Devil — hunter of men and keeper of souls. The dead and the taken inhabit this Otherworld, a place where, other than Herodis, they are not lent new life, but instead live out not their immortality, but their seeming perpetual death as spectacle.

Time and again, as we have observed, incorporeal souls are 'physically' manhandled in the afterlife. Yet the 'special' somatic properties of souls belying their seeming solidity are qualities emphasized in their potential to be destroyed and remade. Destruction and reconstitution is a favourite theme of these visions, metonyms for the physical destruction the dead body undergoes in the earth while the soul is purged beneath it; mirroring too the body's dissolution in the tomb, and its ultimate reassembly at the Last Judgement. As Caroline Walker Bynum has noted, this digestive imagery — commonplace in the corpus of otherworldly visions — bears an unmistakably morbid, macabre resonance.[12] In the fifteenth-century Middle English octosyllabic couplet translation of *The Vision of Tundale*, this punishment is administered by the most memorable of beasts of Hell, the crow-like demon of the frozen lake of the fornicators (ll. 890–919.).[13] With its metallic beak, it devours, digests, and excretes fornicators, mimicking what carrion-fowl would do to unburied men and beasts in the world above (ll. 914–19). Almost as if it were a parasitic insect, it impregnates the bodies of the shades with its young, who, once emerged from the demon, begin to consume the reconstituted sinners from within. These souls feel the same torments that their dead bodies would in the grave: 'stronge bytynge they hadde wythinne | Wyth woode (*wild*) adderes & other vermyne', experiencing the very vermin of the burial pit (ll. 927–28). The rotting of earthly remains is given perverse spiritual continuation in the tortures of the dead in *Tundale*. The dilatoriness of time in the hereafter and the permanence of punishment on inexhaustible spiritual bodies is gruesomely emphasized, in a motif common to the genre of the otherworldly voyage, reiterating the cyclical nature of purgation and death.

[12] Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, p. 293.

[13] Edition used is *The Vision of Tundale*, ed. by Rodney Mearns (Heidelberg: Winter, 1985). A pan-European vision, this account of the Otherworld was originally a Latin poem composed at Regensburg in the mid-twelfth century by an Irish monk named Marcus. It was the most popular and influential medieval voyage to the Otherworld prior to Dante, enjoying translation into almost every European vernacular.

This 'macabre' punishment, despite its seemingly intrinsic purgative character, can be a torture without any prospect of cease, as mediated in the appearance of a spirit of the dead to the living in a tale from the *Gesta Romanorum*. This tale employs the well-worn device of the dream as medium for the dead to impart their testimony to the living, and (just as in Herodis's sleeping vision in *Sir Orfeo*, above, and in other texts not discussed here, such as *A Revelation of Purgatory*), as a means of temporarily conveying a living visitor to the Otherworld. Here, in the *Gesta*'s Tale LXVIII, a married woman acts as a go-between for a married man and married woman engaged in an adulterous relationship. Taken to her deathbed in time, she makes full contrition, is shriven, does penance, and dies. The adulterers too fall ill, but die without confession and repentance. Soon afterwards, the go-between's husband prays 'that god wolde shewe hym how his wife fared. Afterwards, on a night, as he lay in his bedde, his wife aperid to hym, and seide "housebond, be not a-ferde, but rise vp, and go with me, for thou shalte se mervayles"' (p. 384). The wife's words to her husband are indicative of how the returning dead might naturally be feared. Despite her husband's expressed wish for the apparition, he must be assured by this nocturnal apparition both of her un-diabolical nature, and that she intends him no harm. Her nature is lent no descriptive embellishment, but her status as spiritual guide (psychopomp) to her husband and as an implicit dream-apparition implies the incorporeal, spiritual nature of her revenancy, and neatly reprises the go-between role she maintained in life.

The marvels the wife has promised her husband are immediately apparent: he is not only to witness the manner, but also the place of her purgation. Far more is to be revealed to him than indeed that for which he prayed: 'He rose, and wente with here, til they com into a fayre playne' (p. 384).

> Then she seide, 'stonde here still, and be not a-ferde, for thou shalte haue no harme, and wisely beholde what thou shalte see.' Then she wente a litill way from hym, til she come at a gret stone, that had an hole in the myddes; and as she stode a-fore the stone, sodenly she was a longe adder, and putte here hede in at an hole in the myddys of the stone. And crepte throwe. But she lefte hire hame [*skin*] with oute the stone, and anone she stode vp a fayre woman. (pp. 383–84)

This female transformation to serpent is redolent of the monstrous, and by turns disenchanted women of the romances of *Melusine* and *Lybeaus Desconus*. This process of a serpent renewing itself by shedding its skin through a bore-holed stone would have been immediately recognizable to the readers of medieval bestiaries, where accounts of the natures of beasts were always moralized. The Lion and Pelican were not alone in their emblematization as Christ-like creatures: accounts of the serpent would expound on its regenerative skin-shedding aspect, denotative of shedding mortality and sin. She patently discards not only her old

skin of sin but also the whole ambiguous form of serpent (typologically liable to be applied to both Christ as healer, and Serpent as Edenic tempter) emerging transfigured, and purged. She explains further that she has been saved, now that she has travelled through the stone — Christ's wounded side.

The demons of Hell too are at hand here, bearing the two adulterers, casting them both into a cauldron 'and helde hem there, till the fleshe was sothyn fro the bonys'. Excruciatingly, they are both rendered down to skeletons: 'Then they tokyn oute the bonys, and leyde hem beside the cawderon; and anon they were made man and woman' — a process that is repeated continually. Where the redeemed woman sheds her skin in atonement, the two damned lose both skin and every scrap of the flesh which induced them to carnal sin. It is a most macabre torment, both sinners emerging as the skeletal cadavers they would appear as on Judgement Day, to be recombined with their flesh. Damned, they are hopelessly susceptible to the molten brass's effects, a telling contrast with the accounts of saints who could resist all bombardment with molten metals.

The man recognizes his neighbours, the adulterers. His wife explains that her deathbed penitence and unction has saved her (though he must continue to pray for her), while these two will suffer this torment sempiternally in Hell. To round off the tale she informs her husband he has not long to live and must prepare himself for death. This represents her gratitude in death for her husband's prayers: death will never take him suddenly, and is the ubiquitous token of truth for the visionary in these encounters — the vision invariably shortens their lifespan.

The dead did not always wait for unsolicited prayers to relieve them. Instantly arriving in Purgatory on death, they would seek to shorten their stay there to as great an extent as possible, soliciting suffrages first of all from those who knew them in life. For this they would appear to them in some recognizably human form (however tormented), and (somewhat less often) as solely an auditory phenomenon. Other accounts too, such as the one above, portray the grateful dead thanking their relatives only on their final release from purgation as a blessed spirit for the prayers which have speeded them on their way. A third, less fortunate category of spirit showed themselves as residing in Hell to their living relatives, a place from which no prayer can release them. Their grace was only to warn their kin of the terrors of Hell.

In such shorter tales the appearance of the disembodied dead can only be inferred, as we have witnessed. Yet the very absence of detail can symbolize the purity of the souls of the virtuous in such examples. Their 'physical' template is as blank as their souls are spotless, in marked contrast to the gratuitously embellished spiritual forms of sinners, particularly women, which will be examined below. An initial example, however, Tale LXVI of the *Gesta Romanorum*, is a

'monastic' ghost tale, offering an account of brotherly charity persisting beyond the grave. The tale is not an appeal for delivery from Purgatory, but a testament to a successful graduation from it:

> Some tyme ther were iij monkes, dwellyng to-gedre in a Convente, that loved hem wele to gedere — ij of hem be-gone to be seke, and deyden of seknesse; and the third lafte on lyve, that night and day deuoutely prayed for his brethere, that here payne of purgatorie myght be released the sonyre for his prayere; and so they were. (p. 382)

One night, some time later, another monk sees two monks sitting on a grave, each of them having 'a tabernacle tapre brennyng in his hande'. We are told it is after matins; the other brothers would therefore have been asleep. He summons the Abbot, who, seeing the two on the grave, and not evidently recognizing them, *conjures* them to say *what* they were. Again, diabolical influence in an apparition must be eliminated by its witnesses. Answering him, they assert their un-demonic nature, saying they are monks sometime of that house that are now 'scaped the peyne of purgatorie', through the prayer and the beseeching of Robert, their 'felawe'. They add 'and when we were delyuered, we prayde for Robert, oure felawe, that he shuld neuer fele the peyne of purgatorie, and it is graunted vs; and we abide, till Robert may go with vs to the blisse of heuyn'. The Abbot, puzzled, answers Robert is not sick, and, going to see how he fares, is met by a monk running to tell him that Robert has, in fact, just died. Then the Abbot 'turnyyd a-gayne, for to se if the monkes stodyn still there, and they fownde hem not'. Sudden disappearance is the inimitable confirmation of an otherwordly visitation, and here, a definite index of incorporeity.

The moral is perhaps the most apposite interpretation provided of all the tales: 'and so they wentyn all to heuyn; for it is written "he that prayeth for anothere, laboreth for hym self, for to come to the blisse of heuyn"'. As with the episodes of the grateful dead (above, Chapter 2), this tale is a vivid endorsement of the doctrine of Purgatory and of the efficacy and (especially) benefits, communal and personal, of prayers for the dead. The giver of prayers in this instance benefits to the extent of his short-circuiting Purgatory completely. Just as alive he offers prayer enough for all three souls, the two dead monks endure purgation sufficient for all three.

As a ghost story, the tale of the three monks depicts a (cloistered) world seemingly accustomed to the supernatural, and not merely the spiritual. Monastic chronicles of the Romanesque period were among the first narratives to deploy ghosts in exegetical contexts, and the tale from the *Gesta* accords formally with these earlier Latin chronicles. The apparition of the dead monks is neither invoked nor anticipated, but it occurs within the environment of those whose

business is the cure of souls. Hence, the Abbot is not described as unduly shocked to learn that he speaks in fact to two brothers late not only of the monastery, but of Purgatory. Throughout there is an implicit decorousness in the narration; the surprise announcement of the monk Robert's death renders the two dead monks not only witnesses of Purgatory but also, in a mode characteristic of the appearance of the dead, as portents of death themselves. Yet theirs is by no means a malign function. They are not harbingers of vengeful death, but quasi-angelic announcers of heavenly attainment. As we have noted, the sanctity of the ghosts is marked in the lack of any description of their appearance in death — any visual embellishment, invariably one of horror, would be an index of perfidy. At first they could be mistaken for human; we know nothing of their origins or nature until their interrogation by the Abbot. Though they speak, the quality or source of their voices is not described. It follows (perhaps) that they are no more remarkable than the voices of living men. Again, the story does not purport to classify the species of these ghosts; their appearance is wholly ambiguous, but their proximity to what is presumably their graves offers a sentimentalizing, humanizing index of their mortality. Conforming to the interest shown by the writers of these English stories of the dead, this example is unconcerned with classifying the nature of the miracle it relates. Among the sparser of the examples surveyed here, it does not even describe these events as a miracle; it does not seek to assess what might be called the 'natural properties' of the revenants, nor does it excuse the intrusion of the dead into the world by the device of dreaming in the visionary. Two waking monks corroborate this event, and the ghosts are known only as monks. Descriptors such as ghost, spirit, or indeed dead men are absent. What is at issue in the tale is its function as testament to the reality and tangibility of the purgatorial existence of the dead and of the need of the dead for the ministrations of the living in Purgatory. The tale is a demonstration that, even though upon burial 'the key turns on the dead for evermore' according to John Mirk (see above, Chapter 1), the boundaries between the world of the living and the dead are porous in one essential manner. The exchanges of suffrage allowed by the system of Purgatory, made clear to any audience of these tales, imply that the living should not marvel overmuch when the dead come to express their gratitude.

The Trental Legend in Middle English Tales

Familial bonds also drew the dead to confront the living. The widespread model for the intimate appeal from dead relatives to their family was the legend of 'The Pope Trental': the ritual thirty masses Gregory the Great had supposedly sung for

his dead mother after she appeared to him in torment; a tale drawn, like so many of the exempla of the dead, from Book IV of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*. Here, however, in Book IV, Chapter 57, it is not originally Gregory's mother whose soul is tormented (and relieved), but a usurious monk named Justus. Nonetheless, the maternally inflected legend became very popular in English writing, surviving in three discernable versions, one of which stimulates the ghost story in the romance *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (see below, Chapter 5).[14] We will assess variants of this narrative in exempla before turning to consider how they are elaborated in romance modes, and made macabre in *The Three Dead* and *The Awntyrs off Arthure*.

It can be more helpful, however, to consider the Trental legend as an archetype rather than a set narrative; ultimately, any vision of Purgatory (just as *The Gast of Gy* is) conforms to the same pattern, however expansive the narrative. Yet, closest to the archetype as received in the later Middle Ages are those visions which recount the appearance of a mother to her son, who subsequently secures her release from the pains of Purgatory inflicted through a sin unconfessed at death. Yet this pattern could also be appropriated to exemplify the permanency of the consignment of the dead to Hell, in one variant (where the woman speaks of the impossibility of any surcease), or even the prayers of a woman for a dead friend as in the *Revelation of Purgatory*, a fifteenth-century prose vision in a dream of a dead woman granted to her female friend. All tales demonstrate the consequences of sin as torture on the bodily manifestation described by recent writers such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Carol Zaleski as a psychosomatic or somatomorphic body — a visible, pliable, and sensitive manifestation of the human spirit.[15] In effect, we are presented in these medieval tales with a wailing ghost whose descriptive attributes are intuitive, in which little evolutionary difference can be found in literary versions witnessed from Virgil to Dickens.

We will consider three iterations of 'The Pope Trental' motif: one from the Vernon manuscript, the largest existing manuscript of Middle English didactic literature, which cites the appearance of Gregory's mother to the holy man himself; and two tales (LXVII and LXXXI) from the *Gesta Romanorum*.[16] In the initial example, Gregory's mother, a virtuous woman of universal good renown, dies

[14] See Cooke, 'Tales', in *Manual*, IX, 3267–68.

[15] Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, pp. 156, 291.

[16] These three examples have been cited elsewhere by Stephen H. A. Shepherd in his commentary to *The Awntyrs off Arthure* in his anthology of romances (*Middle English Romances* (New York: Norton, 1995), pp. 369–77).

without confessing her killing of her illegitimate baby, the product of an adulterous liaison, in her youth.[17] This is to be shown to have specific consequences redolent of the acute punishments meted out in the apocryphal *Visio Pauli* and *Petri* to abortioners. Some time after her death as Gregory says Mass:

> Al sodeynlich a-Midde his messe
> Ther drouh touward him such a derknesse
> That lakkede al the dayes lyht
> And was derk as hit weore midniht;
> And in that derknesse a myst among,
> Al stoneyd he was, such stunch ther stong;
> Ther-of so grislich he was a-gast
> That al swounyng he was al-mast.
>
> (ll. 51–58)

Progressively, the nature of this indistinct phenomenon becomes clear to the audience, in a skilfully arranged programme of images and gestures which defines the apparition as an anomalous interruption of nature (and of sacred ritual). Its first appearance does not assume any human form, but rather a vague manifestation conforming suggestibly to an eclipse which blots out the light of day. Darkness and mist, the crepuscular aspects of the otherworldly environment, are quickly registered here as the harbingers of an otherworldly visitor:

> A-Midde the derknesse ther drough on ner
> A wonder grisly creature
> Riht as a fende ferde hire feture;
> So Ragget, so Rent, so elyng [*so ailing*], so vuel [*so foul*],
> As hidous to bi-holden as helle-deuel;
> Mouth and Neose, Eres and Eyes
> Fflaumed al ful of fure lighes
>
> (ll. 60–66)

Thus a cocoon of darkness is established for a being who may reside only in darkness, as yet to be denied the light of Paradise. At the centre of this necrotic penumbra, the ghost appears, at first described only as 'creature'. Yet the shape that approaches the onlooker is described in loose terms — raggedness, torn features, illness — all of which denote pain, malformity, and malignancy. At first

[17] *Trentalle Sancti Gregorii*, in *Minor Poems*, ed. by Horstmann and Furnivall, I, 260–67 (ll. 19–20).

undenotative of any human form, it gradually assumes a mouth, nose, ears, and eyes, all consumed with fire. Confirmation of its nature, diabolical or spiritual, in accord with the formula of *discretio spirituum* established in these narratives, must await the Pope's conjuration, at which (ll. 67–74), the ghost yields up her identity:

> The gost onswerde with dreri cher [*answered with sad countenance*]:
> 'I am thi Modur that the beer [*I am thy mother that bore thee*],
> That for vn-schriuene dedes derne [*for unforgiven, secret deeds*]
> In bitter peynes thus I berne [*In bitter pains thus I burn*].'
> (ll. 75–78)

She explains her unconfessed sin to her son's questioning (ll. 92–96), and indicates the remedy to her plight: the boot to her bale is a Trental of masses to be sung on ten chief feasts (l. 107); that is, three masses, each sung over the liturgical year within the octave (the surrounding eight days) of the feasts marking the passage of the liturgical year: Nativity, Epiphany, Purification, Annunciation, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, Immaculate Conception, and of the birth of Our Lady (ll. 109–17). Consenting, Gregory conjures her to appear to him in twelve months — after, as it were, the completion of her course of spiritual treatment (ll. 153–56). It is only then that he finally sees at Mass his mother returned 'a comely ladi, so dresset and diht | That al the world of hire schone briht' (ll. 169–70). In a gesture common to these accounts of delivered, transfigured women, he initially mistakes her for the Virgin Mary (ll. 178–80). She tells him she has come 'from derkenesse I-dresset to blisse cleer' (ll. 188–89). Thus the dark matter of her hidden sin, which obscures all her form even though she is consumed with flame, is expunged. The supernatural disturbance heralded in her quasi-corporeal presentation, striking literary motifs, are ones readily elaborated by the poet of *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, the most striking adaptation in a literary context of the Trental legend (below, Chapter 5). Yet as we find below, other versions of the legend take greater care to ascribe value and significance to specifically imagined wounds upon the incorporeal body. Here, the almost decorous suffusedness of the dead woman in flame and shadow represents the unspecific nature of the woman's torments in Purgatory. It is a poetic gesture designed expressly to convey the movement to light from darkness.

By way of a coda, Gregory's mother enjoins her son to teach this tale as one with the power to save both the dead and the living (ll. 193–96). The Trental, ever the preferred mode of suffrage for the dead in the Middle Ages, is thus lent its origins and validation in legend, in manner posited also in *The Three Dead* (below, Chapter 5). In practice it was 'the commonest multiple' of mortuary

masses, and the richer the testator, the more anxious they were to have the masses compressed from a dilatory liturgical year as above even to a single day.[18] Ultimately, as Eamon Duffy remarks:

> The attraction of the Pope Trental to the late medieval laity was not primarily its encapsulation of the liturgical year or its colourful story, but the fact that it contained a supernaturally authenticated scheme of intercession guaranteed to bring the torments of Purgatory to a swift and certain end.

Here too:

> The attraction lay in a complex web of factors: the authority of Pope Gregory, the horse's mouth testimony of a spirit out of Purgatory, a sequence of Masses and prayers summing up the whole Christian mystery and extending over the whole liturgical year.[19]

Tale LXVII of the *Gesta Romanorm* thus adopts this authenticating archetype of the Trental legend as witnessed above, substituting a woman who has sinned in a similar manner, with an anonymous holy man as her son. His mother has borne two other bastard sons as well as himself, a legitimate son who becomes a priest (a narrative variant which denotes this story as the B-recension of this story, according to Cooke).[20] After she dies, the priest prays for his mother,

> that he might wete how his modre fared. On a day as he prayed, there aperid to hym a forme of a woman, fro whose hede he saw a derke flawme rise vp; and on here lippes and on here tonge he sawe an horrible tode gnaw, and sesid [*ceased*] not; and fro her tetis [*breasts*] he saw hange ij [*two*] serpents, sore soukynge hem [*painfully sucking them*]; and the skyn on here bak was drawen downe to here hammes [*legs*], and trayled after here, all on fyre, then seide the preste, 'what arte thou in the name of god?' She answered, and seide, 'I am thy modyre; be-holde and se what paynes I am putte euerlastyngly for my synnes'. (p. 383)

Human irrecognition is mediated here through the gestures of spiritual disfigurement — the inscription of sin upon the somatomorphic body. As before, the sight of the mother is so appalling to the son that he cannot recognize her. In the usual gesture, he must conjure her to identify herself, and in the process, she is helpfully described for the audience: her skin has been flayed from her flesh, in retribution for her vanity: implicitly mirroring, yet exceeding in any sense the

[18] Duffy, *The Stripping of Altars*, p. 369.

[19] Duffy, *The Stripping of Altars*, pp. 373–74.

[20] See also *Sermons Edited From British Museum MS. BL Royal 18 B. xxiii*, ed. by Woodburn O. Ross, EETS, o.s. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), chap. 34e, for another iteration of the B-variant.

decomposition of her body in her tomb. Again, her soul's corporeality is concretized in the imaginative yet traditional rendering of her tortures. In a trope echoing countless contemporary moralizers on fashion, her skin is left trailing from her back to remind her of the trains of cloth she wore in life. It is fire of a special property which torments her, without consuming her; blue flame on her head for 'lecherous' hair adornment and array. Her sepulchral corruption is mirrored also in the toads and serpents who gorge themselves on her flesh in Hell, just as they would in her grave — though here they are the allegorical representations of her 'lecherouse kyssynges' and her bastard sons, dangling as serpents from her breasts.

This is an overwhelmingly antifeminist account of female sinfulness, even of female sexuality itself, punished in the hereafter. Her son, in affectingly well-sketched emotion (indicated here more than the Vernon text above), dissolves in filial anguish: '"A! modre" he seide, "mowe ye not be sauyed?" "No", she saide; and wente a-way fro his sight.' Our expectations of this tale then are left unfulfilled; this is no example of post-mortem redemption from Purgatory through the piety of suffrages for dead souls, but the illustration of a soul's sempiternal damnation exploiting the Trental motif. Here, as before, the dead are ultimately shown to be more pitied than feared. There is to be no remission of this woman's sins. She does not even ask for prayers, as they are of no help where she is: Hell, not Purgatory. In a similar vein, Tale LXXXI of the *Gesta* recounts a pious man who, we are told, greatly fears the pains of Purgatory. He prays that he might suffer fifteen years of sickness in life so that he might be spared Purgatory after death — a variation upon the familiar request of the pious for divine understanding through suffering in medieval spiritual accounts, and an iteration of the ubiquitous didactic commonplace — suffer now to avoid suffering later, as witnessed in the thirteenth-century *Ubi sunt* lyric, which survives in many manuscript versions:

> Dreye here, man, then if thou wilt
> a litel pine that men the bit.
> Withdrawe thine ases ofte:
> though thy pine be unrede,
> and thou thenke on thi mede
> it schal the think soft.[21]

[21] 'Where ben they before us were' (*Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt*), in *Medieval English Lyrics, 1200–1400*, ed. by Thomas G. Duncan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 62–63; my translation.

(Endure, man, if you can
a little pain that is bidden thee.
Deny your ease often:
though the pain should be severe,
and if you think of your reward
you will think it mild by comparison.)

This prescription — draw your purgatory on earth rather than the hereafter, and by extension, having your paradise on earth will exclude you from enjoying heavenly paradise — is witnessed in a signally ludic fashion, in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale' and 'Merchant's Tale' as a way of describing the horrors or by turns pleasures of marriage.

Two rather more extensive (and, in contrast to Chaucer, ineffably earnest) Middle English texts, *The Gast of Gy* and *Pearl* (the latter touched on already in Chapter 1, above) also deploy the souls of the dead for human interlocution. Yet these are not variations on the popular Trental theme as set out above. *Pearl* revisits the genre of the dream vision to elicit the testimony of a blessed, not a tortured spirit, and *The Gast of Gy* constitutes the almost voyeuristic examination of that which cannot be seen — a ghostly apparition — before a clerical inquisition. Paradoxically, the latter spectacle is one utterly invisible to the onlooker, the antithesis to the visually lurid phenomena we have examined heretofore, but one which is to be considered the most orthodox. Gregory the Great, in Book IV (Chapter 5) of his *Dialogues*, had averred that just as the soul encased in the human body could not be seen, so too was it impossible to see the disembodied soul. *Pearl*, by contrast, presents a concretely realized figure representing the soul of the dead child — the subject of the poem — as an aristocratic woman of great beauty. Though we will not examine the transfigured child here, her figure is the summation of visions of saintly (dead) women from the same medieval mannerist lineage as the Virgin Mary and of Dante's Beatrice. The figure of Guy, as we shall see, represents a deliberate lacuna in human perception, and though both figures, in their literary construction, are to be received as key witnesses in the fashioning of the dead in Middle English, it is on the properties of the ghostly figure of Guy which the following discussion will concentrate, amid these highly developed renderings of the spiritual body long sundered from the physical corpse.

Interrogating the Invisible: 'Pearl' and 'The Gast of Gy'

These two texts relate the dialogue of the living with the incorporeal dead at a carefully realized narrative distance — the Pearl-maiden, not to be seen on this earth, is witnessed in a dream, amid an earthly paradise in a transfigured spiritual

body. The ghost of Guy, removed from physical sight, is also the subject of interrogation by the living, this time on earth, but still unseen, in the rather more banal setting of a bedroom: the domestication of the idea of Purgatory taken to its fullest. Guy's suggested intimacy of setting is at once tempered by spiritual, sensory dislocation in his invisibility to others, an inversion of the process witnessed in *Pearl* where tantalizing physical distance from the subject of the vision is offset by an overwhelmingly visual reception of the maiden. *The Gast of Gy* is an ostensive retelling of a documented thirteenth-century *waking* apparition, which attempts to furnish evidence of the destiny of the soul in a markedly inquisitive manner. *Pearl*, a self-consciously literary refashioning of the apparition of a familiar soul to the visionary, is an exquisite adaptation of the didactic trope of the authoritative testimony of the spirit of the deceased enlightening the bereaved visionary. As a true vision in a dream, *Pearl*'s formal pedigree is quite ancient, and is perhaps the most intriguing adaptation of the didactic appearance of the dead for imaginative and literary delectation as well as spiritual consolation in Middle English. *The Gast of Gy* is mediated through the device of a contemporary account, which throws the proximity of the living to the dead in sharp relief. These two dialogues with the deceased demonstrate the popularity, affective potential, and formal adaptability of the theme of the appearance of the dead as one recognizably evolved in complexity through centuries of repeated use and appropriation.

The model for the dead themselves in *Pearl* is not iconographic — or at any rate not the iconography of the macabre — but prefers instead a highly decorous use of scripturally authorized symbol: the dead subject is referred to only as the dreamer's 'pearl', commensurate not simply with the lapidary language of the heavenly Jerusalem from the Apocalypse of St John, but with the pearl of great price of the Gospel of Matthew:

> The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in a fields, which a man having found, hid it, and for joy thereof goeth, and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like to a merchant seeking good pearls, Who when he had found one pearl of great price, went his way, and sold all that he had, and bought it. (13. 44–46)

This reading is paraphrased by the Pearl-maiden herself later in the poem, and the human implication of this is clear; the human cost of Kingdom of Heaven is high; there will be no fathers and daughters in Heaven, no simple reunion, but transformation: all will be pearls, all brides of the Lamb. The process of *Pearl* proceeds by concealment in the symbol of the pearl of the transformations inherent in the medieval Christian way of death; despite the price demanded of

the parable in Matthew, the intended and obvious significance of the symbol of the pearl in the poem is to illustrate a transformation from an object defined solely as material, earthly loss, to a sign of Heavenly reward, both for her and all Christians. We might agree that this subtle, riddling use of a symbol to both objectify and imaginatively transform the dead is perhaps a device somewhat more intellectually satisfying for extended meditation than the feculent corpse which we have spent some time on in this study. Yet that possibly reductive anagogical equation — of mortal loss to heavenly gain — is undermined, perhaps intentionally, by the emotional tenor of the poem. Pearl is still a girl's name, the name of the two-year-old daughter of the dreamer, who has died. He has lost a daughter to death; her existence in Heaven does not alter that, however much he is abjured to look at it differently — as a Christian, not a father — by the spirit of the girl herself. He mourns her death in elegiac if cryptic language with traditional epitaphic apostrophes to all-consuming earth denoting a human horror of the mortal consequences of dying: 'To thenke hir color so clad in clot! | O moul, thou marrez a myry juele, | My priuey perle withouten spot' (ll. 21–24).

No matter how much her sempiternal marriage to the Lamb is celebrated by the poem's revelatory end, what remains with us is the language and affective representation of human bereavement. *Pearl*, of course, does not wholly refrain from employing the rhetoric of morbidity in its evocation of the dead. This morbid poetic is associated with the earthbound, intemperate grief of the mourner, who is taught in his subsequent vision to forsake mourning the earthly and to rejoice in the celestial destination of the dead. From the irreconcilable morbidity of introspection over the permanent passing of mortal life and beauty we move to toward the philosophical acceptance in Christianity of a transcendent mode of life and beauty in death. The earthly body remains the object of suggestive allusion, always a sight decorously concealed from the reader in preferment to the startling display of the transcendent figure of the Pearl-maiden in the earthly paradise. Yet, this is a spiritual body firmly prefigured by the morbid expostulation by the dreamer upon the body in the grave (examined above, Chapter 1, and below), and referred to also (to include the dreamer's future corpse) by the transfigured Pearl-maiden herself at several points in the text (ll. 320, 857, 957). In consequence, as with the narrator of *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms* (below, Chapter 4), the sight of the tomb and the thought of its contents prompts the dreamer toward unquiet dreams of the dead, before we are even aware the object of his lament is in fact one of the dead. As is the dead embalmed steward of *The Squire of Lowe Degree* unto the Princess of Hungary (above, Chapter 1), so too is this pearl his lost 'treasure'. Only gradually do we become aware that it is something precious lost to death, symbolized in a manner

increasingly transparent; this mislaid gem is a girl, 'rounde, smoth and reken in uche aray' (l. 5).

As with the enshrined corpse in *The Squire of Low Degree* (above, Chapter 1), this tomb is also to be 'sered with spicery'. Here, to be sure, are distinctly morbid suggestions of the dissolution of, and the effulgent odours produced by, the saintly body in the tomb. Not only are the flowers of the arbour sweets for dressing the (buried) corpse, but the macabre fruit of the seed and fertilizer that is the body of the dead child, in silent echo of I Corinthians 36–37:

> That spot of spysez mot nedez sprede [*that spot must be bespread with spice*].
> Ther such rychez to rot is runne [*where such richness is run to rot*],
> Blomez [*blooms*] blayke and blwe and and rede
> Ther schyne ful scher again the sunne [*shine brightly*].
> Flor and fryte may not be fede [*flower and fruit cannot be poor*]
> Ther hit doun drof in moldez dunne [*where it fell down in dun earth*],
> Forr vch gresse mot grow of graynez dede [*grass grows of dead seed*].
>
> (ll. 25–30)

In the *tempus putacionis* of August, the narrator visits the resting place of the child, a tomb where yet amid the heat and the floral blooms, the sweet smells of saintly sepulchres induce silence, and then grief, then sleep. Here, in a garden where beauty is inextricably linked with decay, we have, in place of an explicit graveyard, an arbour. Nature and time emphasize the symbolism at work here; harvest-tide is a time where things die for a reason. Working against this latent symbolism is the fact that the Pearl-maiden, a child of less than two years, does indeed die prematurely, unripe; but the transformative properties of Heaven mean that there, all are harvested equally, all are harvested at the right time, regardless of mortal age or sex. The unspoken answer to the unspoken question — why should children die — is yielded an unspoken answer in this opening of natural symbolism: people always die at the right time; their reward in Heaven is one and the same, if they are innocent.

Pearl bristles with homiletic intentions, yet we are left with a different human narrative to freight the didactic prescription of the futility of mourning — and it is this human significance which lingers with us as an audience. *Pearl* constitutes an elegy virtually unique in Middle English for its personalizing response to death: its focus on the consequences of bereavement, brought to a dramatic head with the dreamer's paroxysm of grief over his daughter's grave, naturalistically inducing the sleep in which he will be consoled by vision of the spiritual dead, not the presence of the bodily dead:

I felle vpon that floury flaght,
Suche odour to my hernez schot;
I slode vpon a slepyng-slaghte
On that precious perle wyhthouten spot.
(ll. 57–60)

(I fell upon that flowerbed,
Since such smells shot to my brains;
I fell into a sleeping-fit
Upon the precious pearl without a spot.)

In the same place as she is interred, his 'spyrt ther sprang in space; | My body on balke ther bod' (ll. 61–62). His body retains physical intimacy and proximity with the physical remains of the dead; true communion arises in a spiritual dialogue of both, when the dreamer himself becomes, for a time, but a *gast*.

In the dialogue of *The Gast of Gy*, it is the dead who once more come to the living; the narrative pattern we have become most familiar with. In no wise (as is *Pearl*), an intimate first-person elegy-narrative, we perceive in the narrative of *Gy* a panoramic, chaotic incursion of the dead into a domestic, bourgeois world. The ghost appears to the living as a wonder never mediated or distanced from reality by the manipulation of the dream device. The text of *Gy* takes the form of a vast catechetical dialogue between the titular ghost and the Dominican prior who investigates its apparition for validation by the Avignonese curia.[22] Though unnamed here, the prior is historically one Johannes Gobi, and it is he who, in 1324 or 1325, gave to Pope John XXII the account of his inquisition of the spirit of Guy, which took place that same year. This account was a shorter first-person narrative, a judicial deposition. Thereafter it was adapted, possibly by another Dominican scribe, who recast the story in the third person.[23] It is from this longer version that several vernacular translations are drawn, including the four Middle English versions.[24]

[22] For an account of the text, see Francis Lee Utley, 'Dialogues, Debates and Catechisms', in *Manual*, III, 698–700. The edition used for *The Gast of Gy* is *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole and his Followers*, ed. by Carl Horstmann, 2 vols (London: Sonnenschein, 1895–96), II, 292–333, wherein the Tiberius metrical version is printed with the Vernon prose version beneath. I base my discussion on the latter text.

[23] On Johannes Gobi and the Ghost of Guy, see Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, pp. 149–52, and a longer discussion in Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 105–50.

[24] *The Gast of Gy* has at least four individual Middle English versions, each with several witnesses. The late fourteenth-century Northern Prose version found in the Vernon manuscript

Guy d'Alet, a wealthy burgess of a town close to Avignon, dies in December 1323/24.[25] That same month, according to the Vernon prose version (the text to which I will refer) he returns to his widow 'with-outen sihtlich form, and tormented hire gretliche, eighte dayes aftur his buryinge' (p. 293). The metrical version (in MS Cotton Tiberius E. vii) confirms it an unseen but noisy spirit — 'bot of him might might scho haue no sight; | and in her chamber oft might sho here | mikil noyse hidos bere' (ll. 52–54). His sinister, unseen, yet palpable manifestation as ghost conforms to a modern sense of what constitutes a haunting by a poltergeist. As we will see below, in the Vernon prose version, his presence is explicitly noncorporeal. Here is no corpse-like *draugr* physically risen from the grave, nor even a condemned spirit making visible monstrance of its tortures as we have witnessed hitherto. Expressly related as a presence among the living, yet one remaining invisible among his interlocutors, he is nonetheless portrayed as one capable of uttering speech; and as an invisible, yet vocal, presence his role is accordingly less to supply searing *images* of otherworldly punishment than compendious *testimony* of the processes of dying and purgation.

Routinely orthodox in its programme of eschatological topology and doctrine, *Gy* intercalates its doctrine with drama: it evokes a discernibly human anxiety of the dead as other before its programme of instruction is levied. After it becomes apparent that she is haunted, Guy's widow, anxious to discover the nature of the presence besetting her, seeks help from the Dominican chapter of her city. She cannot determine whether it is 'a gillerie of the fend or non' but it is certain that 'the spiret [is] in the bed that hire hosebonde died inne' (p. 295). The Dominican prior (Johannes Gobi), by contrast, trusts (just like the titular saint of *Erkenwald*; above, Chapter 2) that this event portents some great showing of God, and not an illusion of the fiend; he is nevertheless bound to determine its true nature through the process of *discretio spirituum*.[26] As with any miracle, this is one to be

(Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a. 1) and Oxford, Queens College, MS 383 is based directly on the original Latin versions, but does not reproduce them to the fullest. Nonetheless the prose version represents the most complete translation in English, having no textual lacunae, unlike the metrical four-stress couplet version which it seemingly spawns in BL, MS Cotton Tiberius E. vii of *c.* 1400, which itself has three other witnesses. There exists also a five-stress couplet version in a fragmentary print by Pynson, together with a quatrain version in Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepysian Library, MS 2125. Authorship has been variously attributed to Johannes Gobi, William Nassynton, or even John Mandeville (Utley, 'Dialogues', p. 699).

[25] He is properly known in the Latin sources as Guy de Corvo, of Alès.

[26] On *discretio spirituum* in *The Gast of Gy*, see Greenblatt, *Hamlet*, pp. 103–05.

diagnosed and affirmed by the church; and, as in the manner somewhat of the *inventio* of a saintly relic, the Prior is quick to grasp the opportunity presented him. He proceeds with the masters of theology and philosophy to the widow's house, escorted by two hundred men-at arms provided by the mayor (a seemingly creative addition along the stemma of its textual development as Alés historically had no actual mayor), 'For more sykernesse and witness' (p. 295).[27]

Here then, the return of the dead is a distinctly temporal, social concern as well as spiritual matter. The unspoken potential of the dead to do harm is a threat assessed as something more than the mere distressing of a widow. A personal spiritual crisis here becomes amplified into a physical, communal one, and the very fear of the dead is seen to warrant force of arms. The ritual arming of the Prior's host for spiritual battle with the dead is described almost in the manner of martial romance. All accompanying the Prior are shriven exactly as they would be before battle. A Requiem mass is sung to propitiate All Souls, especially the unquiet soul of Guy. Finally, almost analogous to a hero taking a second suit of body armour in modern action film, the Prior secretly places the Eucharist upon his breast as an ultimate ward against evil. Guy's house is now besieged as if it were the redoubt of a heresiarch. In groups of deliberately trinitarian three, the two hundred men-at-arms are disposed around the house's perimeter, roof, windows, and garden — not simply to await assault — but, in keeping with the Prior's intense spirit of enquiry, rather 'to abyde and wayte the caas of that wonderful thing' (p. 295).

The Prior ritually blesses the house on crossing the threshold. Proceeding, with a definite narrative underlining of its ominousness, to the 'Inemaste chaumbre', the Prior asks the widow to identify the place of her husband's death. The succeeding conjuration and description of the ghost of Guy is articulated skilfully — tacitly evoking and sustaining the audience's suspense:

> And heo [*she*] tremblinde onswerde & seide: 'That is the stude that he diede inne. Goth for-thi, I preye ow, & seith sum good beodes for his soule, & per-auenture ye schul fynden him there. And as thei wente forth, the prior seyde with a loud voys *Dominus vobiscum*, and afturward he seyde the gospel of *In principio erat verbum*; and ther stood a fourme bifore the bed, and thei seeten adoun seiden al the seruise of the dede. [...] And whon thei come to *Agnus Dei*, thei herden a mer vois & small as of a child, seyinge *Amen*. (p. 296)

At every turn it is understood that the dead man is in the room, unseen or concealed — listening. The wife is visibly afflicted with fear of the dead, trembling as she approaches Guy's deathbed. The holy men (more flatteringly) are conveyed

[27] Greenblatt, *Hamlet*, p. 285.

with no such sketching of their human response to the proximity of the dead. The loud injunctions of the living prior and the timid, barely audible voice of the deceased are rendered in pointed contrast to each other. When the ghost finally signals its presence in joining the *amen*, it immediately identifies itself as a Christian spirit. As such, the Prior can now conjure it as 'Godes creature', and not as a demon. He interdicts its ever leaving the room unless it speaks to them (if it may) of all they ask it. Yet this seeming recognition of the ghost's Christianity by the Prior is one that he constantly withdraws and restores throughout the tract as a strategy of rhetorical leverage in assessing the condition of the spirit, and moreover, to feed his own insatiable curiosity in regard to the afterlife.

The apparition has by now drawn quite an audience, and it is here that the ghost's manifestation as an invisible voice is confirmed. Jean-Claude Schmitt draws our attention to how this scene, this disposition of living and dead, is rendered in a highly literalistic manner in one late fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the story of Guy (possibly by the fifteenth-century French artist Simon Marmion). This shows the Prior's party and the widow arranged around an empty space in Guy's chamber, listening for the ghost they cannot see.[28] In the Vernon manuscript, the invisible ghost replies to the Prior's command:

> And thenne spac the vois loudore then it dude to-forehond and seide: 'A Mi prior, aske hastiliche that thou wolt, & I schal onswere the as ferforth as I may thorw leue and kynde.' And when alle the men herde that voys, thei comen alle eornynde to the Chaumbre troweden that they scholde seon sum gostly thing sihtlich; and not-for-than thei ne seghe nothing sihtillich, ac thei herde onlich a vois. (p. 297)

The familiar rites of conjuration are completed — the Prior has the ghost publicly confirm its non-malignancy for its audience, whose curiosity is quickly outstripping their fear. The ghost declares, 'I am the gost of Gy that is ded, I am a good spirit & not a wikke.' At this, the ghost of Guy curses the body of Guy, using the rhetoric of the medieval dialogues between the Body and Soul, where the soul blames its body for its predicament (see above, 'Als I Lay'). Guy in body gave his soul nothing but deadly sin — now 'lith Gy's bodi in in the eorth iburied and veleth no trauayle, and ich, his spirit, am tormented here for synnes of his bodi' (p. 299). Guy accordingly paints the most skewed portrait possible of his body (which he refers to as nothing other than a coat — a traditional epithet) enjoying blissful repose — serene and untroubled by the punishments it has earned for its soul, a soul which in this reading becomes something of an autonomous,

[28] Malibu, Getty Museum, MS 31, fol. 7. Illustrated in Greenblatt, *Hamlet*, Plate 8.

immaterial whipping-boy for the excesses of the flesh. In the macabre mode (if not here) this is an argument easily countered — the body endures as horrific a fate as the tormented soul, so that, in the dialogues of the Body and Soul (again, if not here — Guy's body is not disinterred and reanimated to defend itself), the corpse protests to no end its immedicable putrefaction as a fate worse than death or refining fire.

Here, then, the deployment of the Body/Soul schism serves to underline the fragility of Guy's spiritual nature. His expressed incorporeality, his invisibility, the feebleness of his voice all point to the tenuousness of the link between this world and the next through which he speaks, in spite of the emphatically disruptive incursion into this world which Guy's apparition might seem to constitute. This rupture of nature is not the desired interpretation, however. Guy's ghostly return is rather sanctioned by 'kind' and divine Grace. This renunciation of the body by Guy also serves to distance him from the more anomalous corporeal modes of revenancy, which we have seen above in examples from Mirk (Chapter 2), making him a verifiably Christian, doctrinally sound revenant that can satisfactorily articulate the consolatory intentions of the narrative. Christian eschatology is more decorously illustrated through an intangible ghost than a corpse staggering in through the door for no reason, as frequently recounted in the tales of Romanesque chroniclers such as Caesarius of Heisterbach and Walter Map. Resuscitation, furthermore, would be an undoing of his death, a death whose Christian consequences his apparition is expressly designed to illustrate. Guy then, is no Lazarus, and illustrates a return from death to be sure, but not a return to life; not in any sense a forsaking of the place appointed for his punishment. The text of *Gy*, in its utter separation of dead body and living spirit, re-emphasizes that this apparition is a return from death only in the most limited and temporary fashion. There is to be no restoration of Guy to a living body (or macabre, animated cadaver) prior to Universal Judgement — until then his body is a coat he cannot again wear.

The first part of the disputation of the Prior and the ghost establishes the protocol for Guy's programme of revelation; he is not authorized to speak of souls other than himself, nor of matters beyond the nature of Purgatory. As we have already seen in Chapter 1 (above) Guy maintains that there are in fact two places of purgation: 'common' and 'partable' (individual) Purgatory — the one spiritual and communal, the other bodily and solitary. The first lies at the centre of the earth; the second *is* this earth, specifically his bedroom, where we later discover the sin which consigned him to Purgatory was committed. In a reversal of the

Latin text's specification, he occupies this room by day among the living, and by night returns to the bowels of the earth (p. 304).[29]

This notion of a dual Purgatory, part of the increasingly consistent enumeration of its attributes which we have seen vernacularized already in *The South English Legendary*, and a feature of literary representations of the purged such as in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (below, Chapter 5), was current among Dominican scholasticism of the early fourteenth century but was never made part of official doctrine and was allowed to lapse.[30] Yet in terms of overall narrative decorum there is a definite sense too in *Gy* of the visitation of the dead of Purgatory to the living rather than the other way around (so often rehearsed in the *Tundale* and *St Patrick's Purgatory* texts), proving far more inquisitorially fruitful than the visions of the afterlife witnessed by a living man visiting the Otherworld himself.

The disquisition in *Gy* moves to what it is like to die, amounting to a validation of the prescriptions of the *ars moriendi*. Guy offers no new information from his own experience of having died here, merely rehearsing well-established deathbed etiquette, before proceeding to an extended debate on the nature of the Mass and the relative efficacy of each of the various components of the liturgy for the dead. Guy reveals his special affection for the Mass of the Holy Ghost, and explains that because of the offerings of a poor friar whom he sustained in life, he will in fact be released from Purgatory by Easter (p. 313). Later, he says they will know he has been released into Heaven if they no longer hear his voice in the house by then (p. 323). The efficacy of suffrages is affirmed by the voice of the revenant: apart from the Requiem, souls are aided most by the uttering of the penitential psalms, with the litanies. He exclaims, 'A, A, Mi prior, yif thou wutest hou the soules ben comforted thorw offyse whon it seid for hem, ofte-tymes woldest thou sey hit for thi dede frendes!' (p. 315). This is a dramatic gesture, reminding audiences of the nature of the tormented dead and reminiscent of the outbursts which marked their volatility and otherness in the exempla seen in Chapter 2 (above).

Guy goes on to relate elements of the medieval theory of demons, before the inquisition now moves to its climax. By the power of the Body of Christ which the Prior bears, and Guy perceives, worshipping silently throughout their dialogue, he commands Guy to leave the room and follow him to the gate of the house, at which he hears 'a soun of a brom swoping a pament. To which vois [possible error

[29] Greenblatt, *Hamlet*, p. 115.

[30] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 151.

for *nois*] the prior spac & seide thus: "Thou Gyes spirit, scheuh the now to vs sightilliche!" To whiche thing the spiret onswerde nought' (p. 320). The text's ongoing tension between decorous revelation and the desire for the sight of wonders is continually embodied in the Prior's enthusiasm for sights and lore, but his wish for a visible manifestation of 'his' ghost for his audience is here again frustrated. The description of the sound of Guy's voice (or noise occasioned by his presence), is striking in its use of an instantly recognizable, naturalistic, and highly suggestive simile of the sweeping of a broom, a simile reprised at Guy's second summoning (see below). The procession to the gate is arrested as the widow suddenly moans and faints upon her bed (p. 320). The ghost refuses to answer the Prior's demands for an explanation of her distress, saying he must ask her himself. Only after the man of God conjures him by a litany of holies does Guy concede that their mutual sin was an irregular sexual act (never specified) of which they are now both confessed, and performing penance. This is an atonement however, which is as yet incomplete and, in the case of Guy, never fulfilled in his lifetime — Guy is here to ensure that his widow completes hers, and so fully expiates their mutual sin. Despite the Prior's wish that Guy name the sinful act for the education of all married men, the ghost primly maintains that God's shrift obviates the requirement for publishing it (p. 322). Yet it is primarily as a warning to wedded men, the ghost says, that God permitted him to speak to the living. Yet he adds, affectingly, when quizzed by the Prior on why he appeared to his spouse and not men of God:

> I loued more my wyf then eny mon of religion. Therfor I eode furst to hire [...]. I beosoughte god I scholde schewe my wyf hire peril, and he grauntede me that I scholde troublen hire, that heo weore nought loren outher in purgatorie [...] as I am nou. (p. 323)

Thus human affection and emotion persists in the dead. We observe here a display of the language of human love beyond death which *Pearl* too integrates into its narrative. These two texts visibly offset the human responses to death and the dead (human bereavement, human fear) against a wider programme of necessary eschatological instruction, but also eschatological topography and otherworldly wonder. Guy can inform the Prior that a tongueless ghost may speak, because it is always the spirit (each person's own) that moves the tongue of a living man to speak. Without a body, the spirit of a dead man needs no such tool (p. 324). Guy, with an asperity increasingly marked throughout the dialogue, mocks his interrogator when asked how the house he stands in is not burned with the fire of his purgation. He builds the metaphor of sunlight passing through a house to describe how, though suffused with flame, he does no harm to his earthly surroundings

(p. 328). This deft simile recalls similar nature metaphors employed to explain the Incarnation of Christ in medieval religious lyrics — as light through glass, as dew on grass. Thus even amid the communion of the dead with the living, the enigma of their physical partition from the living is reasserted. Just as it gradually systematizes an account of medieval lore on the nature of ghosts, the account skilfully accretes suggestions of the ghost's humanity in his increasing fatigue with his examiner, a perhaps wry adoption of a reader's own fatigue at the protracted process of doctrinal summarization performed by the text.

As with *Pearl*, doctrine is not left unalloyed by the human consequences of grief. As the tract draws to a close, the true distress occasioned to Guy's widow by his apparition is revealed. Yet, in a mode far more unsettling than that witnessed in *Pearl*, these visitations by Guy are received not with joy by the bereaved, but with inconsolable fear — his return is shown to be a torment to her, as she implores the Prior, 'For Godes loue aske of hym hou I may be dilyuered of this peyne that he doth to me' (p. 330). Though having told his testimony, and having no further need of appearing to her, her fear of her dead husband (who still declares his love for her) remains overwhelming. Despite the Prior assigning a priest to remain with her to sing masses in that room, she is terrified at the prospect of remaining in her house (p. 331). The ghost refuses the Prior's injunction to leave his wife in peace unless she completes their joint penance and undertakes to be chaste in widowhood and sings three hundred masses for both of them. At this point, said to be Evensong, he vanishes (p. 331).

This is not the last appearance of Guy, however. The difficulty of putting the unquiet dead to rest is highlighted in the tract's coda. The widow is still beset, if not by his actual presence, then by the thought and memory of his former presence, and will continue to be as long as her husband burns in Purgatory — an anxiety again manifested as an untrammelled fear of the dead: 'Forsothe, al that ilke wike the wommon dorst not entren hire hous for drede' (p. 331). Her earthly torment, implicitly, can end only with the fulfilment of her husband's trials in the hereafter. At her urging, on the morning after Epiphany, the Prior, with a complement of twenty Augustinians and Franciscans (but no armed guard as before), again proceed to Guy's house and sing the Office of the Dead. With an apposite sense of drama, at the very words *Requiescat in pace*, the Ghost returns. As before, his intangible presence is indicated as 'a wynd and a soun as of a brom swopynge a pavement' (pp. 331–32). The Prior though, is still determined that his subject make some spectacle:

> 'Lo, we beon gederet here that we may bere witnesse to-fore vre lord the pope whon tyme cometh: wherfore sei to vs sum meruayle!' And the spirit onswerde: 'I nam not God; I-wis, hit is he that seith and doth Merualyles.' (p. 332)

He provides for his audience only a tacit castigation of the schismatic church, and a complaint of the 'rights' of the dead for prayer: 'Religioun preyeth nou lasse for the dede then thei weore wont to do. Amendeth yow, that ye perissche nought' (p. 333). Then he speaks no further. These things, the narrator concludes, were proven before Pope John XXII. But when the pontiff came to Guy's house that Easter, he saw nothing, which is why men believe Guy is now in Heaven (p. 333).

A medieval narrative at pains to point out its authorization by curial investigation, *The Gast of Gy* is aptly summed up by Jean-Claude Schmitt as the psychological dramatization and externalization of the possession of Guy's widow by a spirit — not of her dead husband — but of a spirit of remorse for their shared sin.[31] The studied diagnostic tone and the scholasticism of the Prior's questions and the ghost's testimony sets the tone and tenor of the tract in a mode similar to the disquisition on salvation for heathens practised in *St Erkenwald* (see above, Chapter 2). Just as neither the ghost nor the process of purgation it undergoes can be seen, the audience comprehends Guy's role as conforming to something other than a visible warning and monstrance. Here is a ghost to be heard more than seen, a testimony rather than monstrance or marvel from the beyond. Guy's role is that of witness and warning of the hereafter, not a macabre *memento mori* as we have seen in *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* (see above, Introduction, and below) or the mother of Guinevere in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (below, Chapter 5). It is in examining an account such as *Gy*, a text marked by a notable restraint in describing the supernatural, and yet possibly the longest dialogue with a ghost extant in Middle English, that we can view, as if in relief, the aesthetic and didactic departures made in the literary deployment of such expressly macabre figures as in *The Three Dead* and *The Awntyrs of Arthure*. Despite its mediation as a visitation from the beyond, the text's concerns do not wholly contribute to our readings of literary manifestations of the macabre idiom but rather indicate a wider imaginative context and idiom of the manner of receiving the dead in narrative.

Fundamentally, *Gy* is a text that engages its audience through human gestures, emphasizing an acute sense of the fear of the dead, represented in the postures of the widow and in the spiritual as well as temporal arming of the Prior's host, and, we might speculate, the persistent barrage of questions from the Prior, perhaps masking a certain visceral panic in this dedicated inquisitor of the church. The visitation and dialogue nonetheless conforms to an exegesis of the known science of Last Things, exemplified in a learned debate undertaken by a tireless, insatiably

[31] Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 152.

curious inquisitor, and an articulate, steadfast respondent. In fact, the English text, like its Latin original, is very much structured and articulated along the Prior's programme of enquiry, as an essay in *discretio spirituum*. Just as the character of the Prior must progress through the *Quis? Quid? Quare?* of his cross-examination, so too must the reader advance through an explicit (if dense) sequence of theological education. The dramatization of this dialogue is very effective, rendered with a poetic eye for the realistic. But it is the force of the personalities of the Prior and Guy that animates this tract on death perhaps more than any other disquisition on Dying Well and provides sufficient interest to aid the conveying of the text's ample volume of information. The text's role as a warning of death is perhaps more limited. To be sure, it is a ready acknowledgement of dying, but it moves on towards constituting in intent rather more a warning to respect the offices of the Church and its role in the fulfilment of the sacraments, particularly that of confession. That the cause of punishment in the hereafter in this account is a sexual act underlines that there is no privacy from the judgement of God, or the role of the Church in divining it. Mortal sin lurks in the most private recesses of medieval life, and death is no refuge from its proscription. The promulgation of Purgatory reaches its most domestic pitch in *The Gast of Gy*.

We have already noted the widespread transmission of the story of Guy and seen at least one testament to the story's entering wider literary and popular consciousness in Dunbar's *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, which we examined in Chapter 1 (above), where, amid Kennedy's excoriation by the Dunbar figure as resembling a dead Lazarus, he is finally compared to the Ghost of Guy, the latter-day visitor from beyond the grave. Now in this intertextual mode a seemingly visible phenomenon, the Kennedy cadaver is liable to detestation as a loathsome sight, not merely a disembodied presence, as Dunbar spits: 'Thy skolderit skin, hewed like ane saffrone bag, | Garris [*makes*] men dipyt [*despite*] thar flesche, thow spreit of Guy' (ll. 171–72). The story of Guy can be judged to have been well-known in Scotland through additional references in *The Crying of ane Play*, Lindsay's *Dreme*, and the *Scotichronicon* by Walter Bower, the latter perhaps the likeliest source for Dunbar.[32]

Ultimately, Guy, with Lazarus, becomes a byword for ghosts in the Middle Ages. In the dead of this particular text proving resistant to the explicit application of macabre aesthetic in their literary rendering, we have in *The Gast of Gy* a sense of the fear of the dead firmly independent of macabre imagery. Yet, in

[32] *William Dunbar*, ed. by Bawcutt, p. 416.

citations by other medieval writers such as Dunbar, Guy becomes a figure nonetheless capable of sustaining a retrospective application of the macabre idiom. The macabre representation of death and the dead is an alternative means of externalizing the otherness of the dead, but not the only one at the disposal of medieval writers, and one eschewed in *The Gast of Gy*. In this reading, the unseen provokes as much apprehension as any grotesquely visualized rendering of the dead, in all their lineaments of the grave.

It is the grave itself which constitutes the locus of discussion in the following chapter, where the dead are firmly fashioned as entities incapable of leaving the tomb. The avenues for communication with the living remain that of the dream, or of the preternatural voice from the grave; the familiar rhetorical address of dry bones to the living which we have seen in Chapter 1. Sight of the dead, rationalized in scientific language in *Gy*, is once more confined to rhetorical, not disembodied voices, which seem to address us from the tomb, describe their appearance to us, and undermine, like verbal cadaver tombs, the decorum of the grave's concealment of the dead from the living.

Her sal I duellen, loken vnder stone
Hic habitato, clausus in tumulo.

—John of Grimestone's Preaching Book

Can restlessness reach the cold sepulchred head? —
Ay, the quick have their sleepwalkers, so have the dead.
There are brains, though they moulder, that dream in the tomb,
And that maddening forehear the last trumpet of doom.

—Thomas Campbell, *The Death-boat of Heligoland*

To have no peace in the grave, is that not sad?
But up and down and to and fro,
Ever about me the dead men go;
And to hear a dead man chatter
Is enough to drive one mad.

—Tennyson, *Maud*

Chapter 4

Grave Concerns: The Complaint of the Buried Body

We have already observed, in Chapter 1, examples of the sermon-tropes of the speaking dry bones of the dead, in the Blickling and Bodley homilies from the tenth and eleventh centuries. We will turn now to see the ways in which this rhetoric was developed in more extensive lyrical and narrative contexts in the later medieval period. These later texts offer a more psychologically introspective sense of being dead, but do so in elaboration of a didactic commonplace. With these poems the monitory physical isolation of the dead is made into an affective lyrical psychology of isolation. Though these voices of the dead can address the world and audience outside the tomb, we find in a late, highly mannered example of the lyrical voice and dilemma of the dead, *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms*, that the deceased imagines itself to have no audience to complain to but itself, and to the creatures that devour it. Crucially, this poem integrates the traditional rhetoric of *contemptus mundi* into a new and richly allusive idiom: it explicitly configures itself as a verbal expression of a *transi* tomb (see above, Chapter 1), by the time of the poem's appearance a new and modish form of tomb art. It is a poem, in other words, which demonstrates the imaginative appeal and currency of the iconography of the macabre in England, and indeed the arrival of the *transi* tomb in England, by the early fifteenth century.

The poem's unique manuscript, a conflation of text and iconography, MS Add. 37049 of the British Library, has been dated from the mid- to late fifteenth century.[1] It consists of ninety-six paper folios and two illustrated vellum frontispieces

[1] Aspects of my discussion here in an earlier form have appeared in Kenneth Rooney, 'Tradition and Innovation in the Middle English Debates of Mortality', in *Transmission and*

(which may have come from a different volume). Heavily cropped, it now measures a compact 10¾ by 8 inches. It is an almost exclusively religious collection containing, along with some 145 wash drawings, over seventy individual texts of varying length, in both Middle English verse and prose, mostly in the Northern dialect, including works by Richard Rolle. The book is generally agreed to have been compiled in a Carthusian scriptorium in the northeast of England, perhaps in the charterhouses of Mount Grace, Axholme, or Beauvale. Given that it has undergone significant rebinding and rearrangement, and possibly once formed part of another manuscript, it is difficult to ascertain what its original form, audience, and intention might have been, though its use as an instructional volume for Carthusian novitiates seems likely, as does its suitability for a lay reader imitating Carthusian devotion in a private context, a recognizable trend of the period. In any event, according to John Friedman, 'the earlier state and intention of this MS remains tantalizingly obscure'.[2]

Unique for its lurid pictorial reiteration of its literary contents, the manuscript exemplifies the process of late medieval affective devotional models — the emphasis of emotion over doctrine — and the crystallization of religious thought into images, described by Johan Huizinga in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*.[3] The manuscript's affective strategy runs the gamut of the iconographic themes of medieval religion. It continuously seeks a response in the reader's heart in feeding the imagination with text and image, and is replete with the most sanguinary visualizations of the wounded Christ, Doomsday, the persecuting Antichrist, Cain murdering Abel, and the destination of souls, all of which are offset by tender depictions of the Virgin and Child, together with portraits of the hermetic religious contemplation which the manuscript aims to instil. Amid these varied affective strategies which run the gamut of emotional responses is a predilection for the *repeated* depiction of personified death and dead people themselves as macabre cadavers in the idiom of the *Danse Macabre* and *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*. Neither text is represented fully in this manuscript however. The *Legend* is not present at all, seemingly substituted for a similar theme, the tale of a son who visits his father's grave — a fictitious emperor,

Transformation in the Middle Ages: Texts and Contexts, ed. by Kathy Cawsey and Jason Harris (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), pp. 158–74.

[2] John B. Friedman, *Northern Books: Owners and Makers in the Late Middle Ages* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 192.

[3] Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, chap. 12, 'Religious Thought Crystallizing into Images', pp. 151–77.

Antiochenus — and sees his entombed corpse. The *Danse Macabre* appears only as poem in twelve rime royal stanzas on folio 31^{v} as an admonition 'spoken' by the adjoining cartoon of the figure who typically concludes the dance, the 'Dead King', who urges readers to 'remember' the Dance (see below, Chapter 7).

Although MS Add. 37049 is not unique among English illustrated manuscripts in using macabre iconography (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MSS Douce 322 and Selden Supra 53 contain similar illustrations), it must be considered unique in the frequency of its visual quotation of this theme. The skeletal cadaver appears some twenty-four times in the manuscript, whether as anthropomorphized Death itself or as the mortal remains of the living. Despite sharing the same outward appearance, dead people and death in this manuscript's illustrations are easily distinguished: energetic Death bestrides each scene, in contrast to the recumbent (if loquacious) corpses of mortals. The dead figure of 'the dawnce of macabre' on folio 31^{v} is an exception, however. He at once resembles a dead king, and also a crowned figure of all-conquering death. His warning could emanate from either entity.

This anthropomorphized Death is thus portrayed in the manuscript as a naked corpse still approaching full skeletization. In the artist of MS Add. 37049's own idiom he emerges as a strangely muscular figure — his sinews, always exposed, suggest a wiry energy — and throughout, Death is an energetic spearman who stalks the living. The long-dead are portrayed as cadavers advanced in decay, consumed by parasites and clothed in their burial sheets. In their decay they are to be, if not feared as death is, then abhorred and pitied, and to serve as a salutary reminder of the death they embody. Personified Death carrying a spear is sketched in alongside several deathbed scenes, mostly from Suso's *Horologium sapientaie* as well as an illustrated *vado mori* poem on folio 36^{r} where King, Cleric, and Knight are called by Death to their graves (this poem receives a far more elaborate version, serving as the frontispiece, in BL, MS Cotton Faustina B. vi. II, a deluxe northern manuscript, which like the more humble MS Add. 37049 contains in its programme a text of *The Desert of Religion*, a metrical tract on the contemplative life). Together with a witness in BL, MS Stowe 39, these constitute the only illustrated *vado mori* texts.[4] The three representatives of society in MS Add. 37049 do not, however, so much as go to death, but are assailed by Death, ever present at their shoulder, emerging out of an indistinct nimbus. This *vado mori* is in fact a conflation of the theme with the *ars moriendi*'s deathbed iconography, so that, in

[4] See Jessica Brantley, 'Images of the Vernacular in the Taymouth Hours', *English Manuscript Studies, 1100–1700*, 10 (2002), 83–113 (pp. 84–86).

MS Cotton Faustina the living are set apart from *mors*, who, in the opposite folio, assails *moriens* with his spear. Death adopts this familiar iconographic posture in MS Add. 37049 also. The first of these deathbed appearances is on folio 19^{r}, whose only text is a sequence of scroll-captions given to the various figures. Here we are shown Death's place in the scheme of dying, as only one member of a typically crowded tableau, with the entire Trinity paramount. St Michael (Inspiration in the *Ars moriendi*) and the Devil square off against each other, preparing to fight for the newly expired soul, which takes the conventional form we have seen above (Chapter 3) of a homunculus, rising like a child to its mother, Mary, just as Death has employed its spear. A much simplified version of this scene appears before the manuscript's version of Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* on folio 38^{v} (with sixteenth-century captions), and indeed the spearman death motif is repeated at several points in this text.[5]

Death, in MS Add. 37049, also appears twice as archer: with an erased face carrying five arrows on folio 69^{r} in a poem on mortality treating the *memorare novissima* theme, and with his bow aimed at the heart of the complaining harpist in a poem on the Jobian theme of *versa est in luctum* on folio 84^{r}, a poem on the abuses of the age.[6] Yet Death also has one non-macabre representation in this manuscript, as a unicorn, in the apologue from *Barlaam and Josaphat*, which may have been known to the complier via the *Gesta Romanorum*. Here, on folio 19^{v}, Everyman is beguiled by the honey of worldly pleasure dripping from the tree of life, and, besieged by night, day, and death, fails to take heed to the Hellmouth opening up beneath him (see also below, Chapter 6).[7]

In contrast to these energetic depictions of Death as putrescent corpse (lent the aspect of a living body) is the prone form of the human corpse. In one text, the

[5] Death does not always make an appearance in illustrations of the death struggle, and its stated, if indiscernible, gender can vary in this context. Hoccleve refers to Death in his *Series* (pt IV) as female in his translation of Suso: 'For shee man reueth of lyf the swetnesse' (*'My Compleinte' and Other Poems by Thomas Hoccleve*, ed. by Roger Ellis, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2001), p. 197). This text, in MS Selden Supra 53 (a manuscript which also includes Lydgate's Dance of Death), is illustrated with a figure of skeletal, spear-carrying Death.

[6] Thomas W. Ross, 'Five Fifteenth-Century "Emblem" Verses from British Museum Additional MS 37049', *Speculum*, 32 (1957), 274–82 (pp. 281–82).

[7] Ruth Pitman and John Scattergood, 'Some Illustrations of the Unicorn Apologue from *Barlaam and Ioasaph*', *Scriptorium*, 31 (1977), 85–90 (pp. 89–90). See further Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 127–31.

prose dialogue between the soul and body translated from Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de l'âlme*, the body is ostensibly unburied. Two texts in turn depict the dead body as the humble contents of vainglorious tombs. One instance occurs in folio 87[r] in the tale of Emperor Antiochenus and his son, mentioned above. The other is the illustration of *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms*, to which we will now turn.

'A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms'

This anonymous fifteenth-century poem in thirty-one rime royal stanzas is a dialogue between the occupants of an ornate tomb, imagined in a narrator's dream vision, perhaps in silent exemplification of Matthew 24. 27: 'For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness.' In contrast to the Body and Soul debate of 'Als I Lay' (above, Chapter 3), to which genre the poem is indebted, the author fashions a debate between two figures very easy to visualize (in contrast to the more nebulous figure of the Soul): a woman's corpse and the worms devouring her in death. The poem, however, is more than the dramatization of the colloquy of grotesque occupants of a tomb; it is specifically an anthropomorphization of a *transi* tomb — what it could say if it were to come to life. It proceeds from the function and logic of the epitaph: the conventional 'speech-bubble' of the dead. But it is not merely the epitaph that is elaborated, so is the whole tomb, which reiterates and elaborates the strategy of the epitaph, and verbally duplicates the rhetoric of its art in its teasing out the latent drama of corruption which is encoded in the tomb. *Transi* tombs such as this are a central plank of the promulgation of the art of the macabre, and here we see a poem directly engaged with the newfangled art of the macabre, in its verbal art and pictorial accompaniment in its manuscript.

Body and Worms begins both with the ostentatious display of a living effigy, and the humbling juxtaposition of the simplest kind of medieval epitaph; one marked by the absence of any praise of the deceased, occupied solely by a first-person voice of the dead acknowledging its decay:

> Take hede unto my figure here abowne
> And se how sumtyme I was fressche & gay
> Now turned to wormes mete and corrupcone
> Bot fowle erth & stynkyng slyme & clay
> Attend therfore to this disputacione written here

> And writte it wisely in thi hert fre
> That ther-at sum wisdom thou may lere
> To se what thou art & here aftyr sal be
> When thou leste wenes. Venit mors te superare
> When thi grafe grenes. Bonum est mortis meditari.[8]

This is of course a literary epitaph; while it could serve on any tomb, it is also designed to tell us to pay attention to a verbal tomb — a poem which is a tomb come to life.

As the debate-poem proper opens, we, amid a *chanson d'aventure* opening, are told that the narrator undertakes pilgrimage 'in a seson of huge mortality' — an epidemic of plague — and enters a church where a new tomb has been erected of a woman, whose lifelike effigy is depicted on it. From the very outset, the audience is mindful of death — and it is no 'soote seson' of spring or summer, no April, May or August in which the visionary undertakes his journey, but an indeterminate, pestilential period which sees all succumbing to death, not rebirth, though a later disquisition on the significance of the Lenten liturgy might implicitly hint at a desired, if unspoken setting during Lent.[9]

Suddenly falling asleep, the narrator dreams he hears the noblewoman in the tomb arguing with the worms consuming her cadaver. Their strife, beginning with the woman's (admittedly reasonable objections) as they consume her, moves to a declaration of acceptance from the body, who concedes that her corruption is natural and unavoidable, and that both body and worms must dwell happily in the same tomb until Judgement Day, when the soul will be restored 'with the body glorified to be' (l. 198). She thus finally sets aside the vanity and pride she took with her to the grave (conceived by the artist as a monumentalization of her living beauty upon her tomb), and finally embraces the humility and penitence inherent in her return to ashes. The narrator returns to the waking world and rounds off his vision saying how a holy man advised him to set his dream in writing as a 'delectable' admonition for all.

This poem has attracted considerable attention in recent years. Rosemary Woolf finds in *Disputation* an 'impoverishment' of the conventional debate between the Body and Soul, which 'suffers from the lack of firm intellectual outline'.

[8] *A Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms* appears in *Middle English Debate Poetry*, ed. by Conlee, pp. 50–62; hereafter cited by line number in the text.

[9] Marjorie M. Malvern, 'An Earnest "Monyscyon" and "Thinge Delectabyll" Realized Verbally and Visually in "A Disputacione betwix the Body and Wormes", a Middle English Poem Inspired by Tomb Art and Northern Spirituality', *Viator*, 13 (1982), 415–43 (pp. 424–25).

Nevertheless 'the nature of the debaters provides an ingenious and disturbing framework to contain the themes of putrefaction used earlier in the Body and Soul debate'.[10] Marjorie Malvern, providing an exhaustive reading of both text and image in the poem, acknowledges the macabre medium of the poem's didactic message, but highlights the 'thinge delectabyll' of the poet's intention (l. 213) as an indication of the poem constituting as much an entertainment as an admonition, something of a moral interlude — an instance of instructive re-creation of a type often rehearsed in morality plays. Thus, in this reading, the pictures are 'wistful', the protests of the lady in the grave 'ridiculous', the lists of creatures allied to the worms a playful parody of epic.[11] It is hard to gauge if such a ludic tone could agree with the author's intent; but, like the macabre as a whole, any iteration of its visual themes has the capacity to stimulate, depending on its context, disquiet, or simply bemusement, if not amusement.

Generically, the poem is an adaptation of the medieval Body and Soul dialogue, and a late one, as Woolf has noted. Nonetheless it breathes new 'life' into a genre which was waning in popularity in the fifteenth century in England.[12] Where conventionally the body and the soul would harangue each other as to which of them is responsible for the other's predicament, here we have a dialogue between the female body and worms, with the latter unmistakably acting as a surrogate for personified death, or indeed, the voice of the preacher (whose voices could be satisfyingly indistinguishable in medieval sermons). The poem constitutes an elaboration and synthesis of other tropes and genres: it is partly a dramatized epitaph. Generically, it is both dream-vision and debate, a debate too which develops a theme witnessed in medieval sermons and antifeminist literature — the lament of the ageing woman, which, now transformed as *memento mori*, becomes the lament of the decaying woman. Contempt for the world is re-inscribed here as contempt for women, an apposite approach given the probable Carthusian production environment of the compilation. This is a reflex lent intertextual and imitative significance in the late fifteenth-century Scots writer Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, where the paragon of courtly lovers, Cresseid of Troy, the sparkling, pragmatic heroine of Chaucer's great romance *Troilus and Crisedye*, becomes in Henryson's reading a figure raddled by a punitive leprosy, bestowed by the gods for her offences to love, and, especially against men. She becomes a kind of female Lazarus — leper, yes (as a medieval 'lazar' could be),

[10] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 328.

[11] Malvern, 'An Earnest "Monyscyon"', p. 437.

[12] Malvern, 'An Earnest "Monyscyon"', p. 327.

but also a *memento mori* writ large — a misogynistic encoding of worldly instability in female infidelity in love.

In MS Add. 37049's *Worms*, we are presented with a woman lamenting her physical deterioration not in senescence or in illness. The text of *Disputation* thus becomes a poetic elaboration of sermon verses such as the one below, contained within a late fourteenth-century Latin sermon, where, after the dead have been rhetorically addressed in Latin by the preacher, the response of the dead body as a voice from the grave is provided in the vernacular, in reply:

> Now all men mowe sen be me [*now all men might see by me*],
> that worldys Joye is vanyte [*that world's joy is vanity*].
> I was a lady; now I am non.
> I hadde worschepes; now it ys begon.
> I was fair and gentil both.
> Now ich [*each*] man wyle [*will*] my body loth.
> My frendys, my godes me hav forsake.
> To wyrmes mete now am I take.
> Of al the world now haf I noghth
> bitt gode dedes that I wrogth [*but good deeds that I wrought*].
> Only tho schulen abyde wit me.
> Al other thynges arn vanyte.[13]

This motif of the loneliness of the dead, a conventional theme of medieval moral lyrics and sermon rhetoric, is sarcastically belied in *Disputation*. The body is not alone: it has, after all, worms to talk to! By the same token, the anthropomorphized corpse constitutes an entity with no one to blame but itself for its predicament, instead of, in the Body and Soul debates, being able to castigate the soul for not exercising greater control over it. The body's self-abnegation is assisted enthusiastically throughout by the excoriation of the worms, who strip away at the body's worldly pretensions and wrongheadedness as much as they strip the body of flesh. Malvern observes that the worms, as well as ably maintaining a mimetic representation as parasites in zoological verisimilitude, are figured also as the Body's 'prick of conscience' — the mentors of the corpse. They thus eschew their conventional personification in the sermon mode, one of executors vying for the corpse's worldly 'goods'.[14]

[13] Worcester Cathedral Library, MS F. 10, fol. 208^{r}; 'Now all Men Mowe Sen be Me', in *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, ed. by G. R. Owst, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 530.

[14] Malvern, 'An Earnest "Monyscyon"', p. 426. See *Sermons*, ed. by Ross, p. 182, for one such example.

Thematically, *Disputation*'s language and inscribed art is a tissue of embellished allusion to the Book of Job's conceit of grave as house witnessed in medieval English moral lyrics (particularly in the poem known as 'The Grave' from MS Bodley 343) and in the lyrical registers of medieval drama: *The Raising of Lazarus* from the Wakefield (Towneley) Cycle: 'The grave is my house, I have made my bed in the darkness, I have said to corruption, Thou art my father, to the worm, thou art my sister' (Job 17. 13, 14). Yet the text's ultimate consolatory conclusion is paralleled in Job also: ' though yet worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God (19. 25) — lines quoted in the nocturnes of the Office of the Dead — and realized where the anthropomorphized corpse looks forward to its bodily resurrection at the end of the poem.

Yet, more than a vernacularization of the Bible's own book of death — Job — the poem on its own terms illustrates too the imaginative horror of post-mortem inhumation, and the fascination induced in thinking about what it is like to be dead, so 'that thos on lyfe may hafe space to be redy | To rememor in the same wyse also, | Contynewly thinkynge in the tyme to cum therto | What he salbe & also what is he, | Be it he or sche, be thai neuer so fair' (ll. 181–85). The poem is prefaced on folio 32^{v} of the manuscript by an image of the tomb which inspires the narrator's dream vision (Plate 2). It is only amid a vision that the supernatural dialogue of the voiceless female corpse and its devouring maggots can be heard — a typical distancing gesture which tempers the supernatural elements of the narrative and accentuates the moral. Ostensibly, the picture is a representation of a double *transi* tomb — a monument that juxtaposes the effigy of the deceased as they would have appeared in life with a representation of how the corpse would appear having undergone decay (see above, Chapter 1). The artist of MS Add. 37049 might have worked from the sight of newly completed examples of this kind of tomb. Francis Wormald suggests the tomb at Lincoln Cathedral of Bishop Richard Fleming, who died in 1431, as a geographically convenient model for the artist of Add. 37049; but the only female cadaver tomb commensurate with the likely date of the poem in the first half of the fifteenth century would have been that of Isabella of Warwick, who died in 1439, and whose tomb is now lost. It is in fact the tomb of Geoffrey Chaucer's own granddaughter, Alice de La Pole, who was ultimately memorialized in a double *transi* tomb in 1477, which stands as the earliest extant example of a female *transi* tomb in England.[15]

[15] Francis Wormald, 'Some Popular Miniatures and their Rich Relations', in *Miscellanea pro arte*, ed. by Hermann Schnitzler (Dusseldorf: Schwann, 1965), pp. 279–85 (p. 285).

Though the drawing of the monument of the dead woman in *Disputation* resembles a double *transi* tomb, the text of the debate poem itself makes no reference to the tomb as anything other than a lifelike effigy, indicating that the picture can be read as suggestive of the idea behind the *transi* tomb, rather than constituting a faithful representation of the finished monument. In these terms, the picture could constitute simply an open grave, a cutaway perspective into the contents of an effigial tomb which shows only the living likeness of the deceased. The description of this effigy in the debate poem matches the upper part of the illustration well (to, of course, the exclusion of the actual cadaver). The 'fresche fygure fine of a woman | Wele atyred in the moste newe gyse' appears unmistakably, as a fresh figure, to be a living effigy (ll. 21–22). It is accompanied 'by sondre armes ther many a prynte' (l. 18). The effigy is said by the dreamer to be 'Ful freschly forgyd, depycte, and depynte, | Compassed & made be newe coniecture' (ll. 16– 17). Therefore the picture goes beyond the verbal evidence of the waking prologue to the dream-portion of the debate. Alternatively, it can be argued that what the illustration represents is a transparent view of the contents of the grand memorial described in the poem — a sketch mirroring exactly what the medieval double *transi* monument does without actually being one. We see what the dream narrator cannot see himself: the much-rotted body of the dead woman, something the poet chooses to avoid describing in his own words, allowing instead the personae of the Body and Worms themselves to document its decay. The poet's literary vision is thus a distinctly auditory experience, and only the reader of the manuscript is privileged with macabre, revelatory 'sight'. Only the illustration of the cadaver within the tomb fully describes its decay for the reader, a sight denied the narrator of the debate-poem proper. The reader is thus placed in a position where he can imagine what it is like to be dead, and indeed does not have to expend much effort in doing so, if he is reading the poem from this manuscript.

Disputation offers one other perspective of the entombed body in dialogue with the worms. Here, the skeletal body engages with the worms which, on succeeding folios (fols 33^{v}–35^{r}), are arranged first at her head (as if in conversation), then at her feet (Plate 3). The skeleton is unmistakeably rendered animate in this sequence — it is not only the worms that shift posture; she too alters the position of her hands and arms to indicate the passage of the debate. Here too, in this sequence of illustration, the only index of the dead woman's sex is provided. Divested of her winding sheet, and lacking any identifiable physical attributes, she wears a headdress, though perhaps not one of such ostentation to incur the opprobrium of preachers. Though her seemingly upright pose could be inter-

preted as a figurative posture of standing to speak, she is to be understood as recumbent. The overall perspective afforded the reader here is unmistakably that of the interior of the tomb, indicating in the text where the narrator moves from his waking prologue to the direct relation of his vision. We are no longer outside looking in, as it were, but inside — our perspective entirely confined to the beings inhabiting the grave.

Though scripturally authorized in Job, the motif of sepulchral habitation is redolent too of popular belief of the tomb constituting in itself an experience of which the corpse is eternally aware. Thus, in this reading, the tomb itself, and not some remote Purgatory, is the Body's place of atonement for the sins of her life. The poem is nevertheless careful not to render the corpse as literally animated, only imaginatively, unlike the animated body (paradoxically without *anima*) of 'Als I Lay'. In *Body and Worms* the Soul has long fled; the corpse alone is left to rue the corruption it must endure until Doomsday. The interior of the tomb becomes an unstated analogue of Purgatory — a purgatory for the body, not the soul — a purgatory with teeth as it were, which strips away the causes of vanity and venality in life: the flesh. The poem has no reference to the soul's fate in the real purgatory, only a confident anticipation of judgement. The worms figuratively prune away the excessive growth of the flesh so that the body can the better renew itself in the body glorified to be at the Doom.

Body and Worms offers, arguably, a dream of the dead too unrevealing to be revelatory, and too lurid to be nightmarish. It shows us that however talkative the dead are in certain kinds of didactic writing, they do not always, despite the audacity of conceit, necessarily come to life for us. Yet this verbal elaboration of newfangled mortuary iconography ultimately represents a highly anomalous yet intriguing site for the moralizing of death. The ornate site of the tomb remains just that, a tomb; the only transformation in experience (when we consider, perhaps invidiously, the imaginative leaps of faith broached in *Pearl*) is the banal process of physical decay and the incremental acceptance of the inevitability of death.

Disputation thus leaves us with several final impressions both in its own right and as perhaps the key example of the macabre aesthetics of MS Add. 37049. It is a topical and enthusiastic response to the spread of an artistic theme grafted on to pre-existing rhetorical and generic models. Not only is it a recognizable adaptation of the exemplum trope of the voice from the tomb which speaks of its torment in death, but it can also be read as an account of the testimony of an anthropomorphized tomb itself. If a *transi* tomb could speak, as it were, this is what it would say. *Disputation* is thus a highly affective, internal response to the

outward study of a grave, where the reader is placed in a position where he (or especially) she can imagine what it is like to be dead; a process of imaginative affection apparent throughout this manuscript, where, time and again, the reader draws an elaborate, emotionally affective response from the study of a visual image or object.

We are dealing then with an artist in MS Add. 37049, if not a compiler, who was fascinated with themes of the macabre and their contemporary modes of realization and utilized them to accentuate the macabre aspects of texts which are merely traditionally morbid. The manuscript is a humbler reflection of themes widespread in medieval art at this period, as well as a more specific register of the motifs of macabre art. As a sequence of macabre art allied to morbid text, Add. 37049 shows, in the best tradition of medieval grotesquerie, how the most gruesome of images could be arranged not only didactically but aesthetically in the idiom of the macabre.

Voices From the Tomb — Revisited

We have seen in the *Disputation betwixt the Body and Worms* how, in a mannered variation on a commonplace, the dead are liable to make their complaint from a setting imagined within the tomb. A living narrator shares a physical proximity to the dead contained within a tomb whose silence can lend voice only with the device of a dream. Thus physical proximity is offset with psychological distance: the dead can only be experienced as sentient entities in a vision — a motif we have seen in *Pearl*, where the narrator lies on the grave to speak with its contents — but only in a dream. Yet in this poem, unlike other examples, the dead subject is not aware of any audience. The colloquy of the inhabitants of the tomb, like that of the Body and Soul in 'Als I Lay', is merely overheard, directed not at an intra-narrative audience, but an extra-narrative one — the reader of the text.

In Chapters 2 and 3, above, it has been seen how the dead typically make their appearance among a living audience inscribed within the narrative (even when invisible like *The Gast of Gy*). In this context the dead display themselves, highlighting either the state of their bodies in the tomb or the condition of their corporealized souls in Hell or Purgatory. In this chapter's theme — the stylized complaint from the grave as a mode of rhetoric and narrative — it is appropriate to discuss the evidence too from 'ghost stories' which, though often narrating an interlocution of the living and the dead (a process absent in the dialogue of the Body and Soul or *Body and Worms*), can nonetheless be interpreted as deployments of a thematized complaint of the buried body. These narratives adopt the

impulse behind the lyrical complaint from the tomb and dramatize it in a realistic narrative structure, a third-person narrative where the central episode is a voice from the tomb which makes itself heard among the living. In these examples, the dead are manifested only as voices; and, whereas in lyrical contexts this voice has a rhetorical integrity and logic in its being 'unseen', these third-person narratives take, as it were, a reductive approach, re-contextualizing the literary effect of a voice from the grave as a narrative wonder.

We have seen the narrative potential of this trope in the alliterative poem *St Erkenwald* (above, Chapter 2). Yet *Erkenwald* is concerned with uninterring and displaying the dead as marvel. In many respects, a cultural commonplace of understanding the dead as monitory object resides in the rhetoric of the epitaph, which, as we have already remarked, constitutes an imaginative and rhetorical gesture whereby the *unseen* dead can address themselves to the living from the tomb. *Body and Worms* is just such an elaboration of the epitaph, though one which redirects the voice of the dead inwardly, and with it our voyeuristic gaze as the body addresses the worms, not the living. Epitaphs, too would have, since classical times, arranged themselves in different categories and trajectories of voice — the dead could address the living, but just as often, epitaphs would be encomiastic addresses of the living to the dead.[16] Yet these could always be literary, rhetorical exercises in genre (and not necessarily utilitarian verse for actual tomb inscription). The point is that the voice from the tomb becomes an imaginative topos with the capacity for exploitation in a variety of modes: from epitaph, to sermon; from sermon to exemplary narrative. The point for us of course is recognition that a visually prescribed macabre (whether achieved iconographically or verbally) is not a prerequisite for effective exercises in exemplary morbidity; the dead who are not seen can admonish as much as those who can be seen.

That medieval didactic tale collections, therefore, should be replete with examples of the dead speaking noisily (but not visibly) from their graves should hardly surprise us. It is not our intention to assess their dissemination here, but rather to trace some of the ways in which these narratives establish their effects. Many examples have their models in Gregory's *Dialogues* and are replete with analogues and variations over time, which cannot be adequately documented.

An initial iteration of the theme comes from *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* where a virtuous woman, though given to fasting and almsdeeds, is nonetheless damned through one deadly sin left unconfessed at her deathbed (Offord, pp. 22–23). Shortly after her death and burial, the people are bewildered by the

[16] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, pp. 400–04.

issuing of fire and smoke from her grave. A holy man takes a crucifix and holy water, and conjures what he has correctly diagnosed as a tormented soul within the grave as to what may be the cause of its torment. That the dead, according to St Augustine, were not supposed to converse with the living remains a protocol tenuously observed by the dead woman's remaining concealed within her tomb. She tells her audience that her soul is irretrievably lost in Hell and her sins have no hope of remission. Her tomb and its contents are to be a memorial not only to her death, but to her punishment in Hell. Not licensed to show herself in a spiritual vision (perhaps in this instance an implicit consequence of her residing in the more secure prison of Hell), she leaves this one visual manifestation on her grave as a token of the truth of her testimony. Such smoking tombs make their appearance in romance also. In Sir Thomas Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal* (part of his late fifteenth-century prose English Arthuriad *Le Morte d'Arthur*), Galahad unceremoniously opens a smoking, speaking tomb, to combat the suspected work of the fiend, whereupon a foul figure 'in likeness of man' flies out once the stone is removed. A body, whose physical state remains unspecified, lies within and is unceremoniously disinterred.[17]

The voice of the tomb need not always belong to the dead themselves. We have seen above how the worms of the grave are endowed with speech and engage the corpse in colloquy. Where before, the worms could be read literally as creatures of the tomb, allegorically as death, and anagogically as the soul or as a Christ figure offering hope to the dead (Christ was often allegorized as serpent), we appreciate with slightly less recoil perhaps the silencing of the soul of a dead woman in favour of the zoological embodiment of demon which has claimed it, in the form of a toad.

Representative of a popular motif, Chapter 102 of *The Book of the Knight* constitutes a homiletic example concerning forgiveness. A woman in the throes of death, a burgess, will not be shriven of the sin of anger despite the injunctions of the priest administering last rites to her — she will not forgive a neighbour of hers for a past offence. After her death the priest dreams that her soul is borne away by four devils and that a toad squats upon her heart. Accordingly, he refuses the woman burial in consecrated ground. Her family, pleading for her, agree to cut open her body, at his suggestion, seemingly in a kind of impromptu spiritual post-mortem. Expecting to find nothing, and to prove the priest wrong, they instead

[17] Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, ed. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 509.

find, validating his dream, 'a grete tod upon her herte ryght fowle lithely and hydrous' (Offord, p. 138).

The priest conjures the toad to speak, and, answering, his nature is confirmed as the devil. The creature testifies that he has prompted the woman to sin for the past twenty-five years. It found the greatest leverage in the sin of anger, he says, relating how it grasped the woman's heart with its feet. Her heart is literally 'in encumbrance' of the devil — who has here adopted the form of a creature often associated with the tomb, together with salamanders, serpents, and worms. It is an apposite demonic incarnation, one whose mortuary connotations underline her death, and one which can, in a bizarre realism, comfortably reside within a corpse. The dual medieval notoriety of the toad as a distiller of venom (here a spiritual venom) and as a parasite of the bodies of the dead is adroitly combined; they are commonplace symbols of moral and physical decay. The sculpted 'Frau Welt' of Worms Cathedral is festooned with frogs — but only on her back — and indeed there is a recurrent association of toads with the feminine in these contexts. Not only do they frequently adorn women's bodies, but also, according to the Dominican preacher John of Bromyard, those damned to Hell 'instead of wives, shall have toads'.[18] These creatures were also reputed to serve as food for the inhabitants of Hell, who in some examples, leave tokens of snakes and toads as evidence of their infernal abode.[19] This demonic agent as voice from the tomb is a notably different phenomenon to the 'personal' voices we have previously witnessed. Indeed the dead woman is denied any agency or voice in this account; the implied moral is that she has been silenced by sin — the corpse makes no supernatural response to her post-mortem abuse — just as in Hell, there can be no response to, or undoing of, sin.

We have seen the consequences of *mors improvisa*, the incomplete confession upon death in prompting the voice of the tomb. In the next example, the voice of the slain roars its indignation from the tomb against those responsible for its death in a further example from the *Gesta Romanorum* (Tale LXIII in MS Harley 7333; Tale XXXVI in BL, MS Add. 9066).[20] In this tale an impoverished knight murders a wealthier nobleman for his treasure so that he can marry a rich woman, owing to a law in that land stating only men and women of equal rank can marry.

[18] Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, p. 294.

[19] As mentioned in the tales of the Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach (1180–1240). See his *Dialogus miraculorum*, bk XII, chap. 18, translated as 'The Gift of Snakes and Toads'; Joynes, *Medieval Ghost Stories*, p. 36; Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 19.

[20] *Gesta Romanorum*, pp. 268–75.This tale has a witness also in Mirk's *Festial*, pp. 88–90.

Having murdered him, he tells the woman they are now free to marry. She agrees indeed to marry him after he has, in a bizarre, morbid, and unrationalized prescription, lain upon the grave and recounted what he has heard there. The account, Tale XXXVI of the *Gesta* in MS Add. 9066, proceeds:

> The knight armed hym and went to the tombe of the dede man, and there he was all nyght. And at mydnyght there came a voice, and said 'O! thou duke, that here lieth, what askest thou of me, that I mai graunt the?' he said, 'rightful domesman Crist, graunte me my peticion. I aske of the no thynge but vengaunce for my blood, that I am vnrightfully slain for my richese'. The voice said, 'this day xxx wyntir thou shalt fynde vengeaunce'.

The Knight and his lady lead a happy life for thirty years. As the folkloric due date for the fulfilment of the curse approaches, he builds a strong castle to defend himself from his doom and bids his friends to attend a feast with him there in anticipation (in a posture strongly redolent of Belshazzar's God-scorning feast). At the feast, still anxious to defeat fate, he shoots a many-coloured bird, thinking it an omen, whereupon the ground opens, swallowing the castle and all within it. A lake remains, filled with water with a strange property which drags all who stumble into it to the bottom. The *moralité* of the tale appositely judges this to be the opening of Hell's mouth, through which the proud are devoured.

Several questions are prompted by this tale which has rather inelegantly adopted its several moral applications. The Knight arms himself for a nocturnal visit to the tomb of the man he has slain, as if wary of the possibility of the dead rising to take vengeance — a possibility that sits comfortably with the almost forgone fact of his expectation of hearing something at the tomb. The requirement in this tale, however, by the Lady herself for the murdering knight to learn what he hears there makes no evident sense in any possible regard, and seems to testify to the tale's folktale elements (in which arbitrary requirements are always prominent) being unhappily abridged or modified from whatever source the compilers of the *Gesta* had at their disposal.

Setting the tale's problems of narrative cohesion and logic to one side, what emerges here is a further variant of the revenge of the dead, treated above, in Chapter 2. What is most interesting in this tale is the voice of the dead and its dialogue with the voice from even further beyond — that of God. In no sense the realization of a beatific vision, this bleak tableau corresponds only obliquely with the medieval literary dialogues of God and man, and Body and Soul, and of the iconography of the *commendatio animae* where *moriens*, alone, commits his soul to God. Though perhaps a tale which should not be expected to support any acute level of literary analysis, it can be seen that the didactic strategies of this story from the *Gesta* are in fact hopelessly cluttered, even by the standards of the *Gesta*'s

already-noted narrative eclecticism. This tale is emphatically, despite its latent iconographic connotations, not an example to 'die well'. That God in this account is *asked* for unchristian vengeance is again testimony of this tale's diffuse origins and of its indecisive re-deployment of them for didactic effect. The tale's *moralité* juggles several moral interpretations before concluding with the need for repentance. It is, ultimately, to be deemed a tale of God's vengeance, not of man's. God's vengeance surely comes, and Hell surely opens for the impenitent.

Nonetheless, the manner in which the trope of the voice of the dead is realized here — amid a highly emblematic posture of a living man lying among the dead to learn wisdom — has a certain pedigree. It is, of course redolent of St Macarius, who lay down with pagan corpses (see above, Chapters 1 and 2). We are left with other, less explicit conclusions from this tale. The dead of this tale reside within and speak from their tombs, roaring their prayers at a responsive Heaven. They never seem to leave this tumular abode, a prospect understood by northern pagan barrow-builders but not entertained in official Christian culture. This tale nevertheless has nothing more to add on the final destination of the murdered duke; but implicit is that the wronged dead, much like the victim of 'The Hanged Man's Revenge' (above, Chapter 2), are propitiated only by death; the dead are at all times to be justly feared in the vengeance they can invoke.

In all these accounts, the dead are inert, or invisible; they eschew any portrayal as macabre cadavers advanced in decay. They remain unseen in their tombs by the text's internal audience and forgo any narrative description. Their spiritual condition alone is related, not their physical state. The recently dead woman of *The Book of the Knight* is not reviled as a Lazarus-like cadaver, advancing in decay — her indignities are more than this. Yet if not illustrative of the macabre idiom per se, these examples highlight a keen sense of the unease prompted by any 'testing' of the dead. The dead murder victim is to be feared in the revenge he calls down from Heaven; a dead woman's breast conceals horrors. In all examples the dead impinge on the thoughts of the living; they are impossible to ignore even in death. Even where the image of the macabre cadaver is not in evidence, an implicit fear of the dead — or at the least fear of their destiny — dramatically propels these short narratives. In most cases they are to be read as efforts to suggest that which is too horrible to be seen, and thus are to remain decorously hidden.

Yet, though constituting examples busily dramatized with onlookers and interlocutors, these tales underscore the actual status of the dead as an isolated entity, belying the consequences of their vocal utterances. These examples from didactic tale compilations all orchestrate the posture of the deceased as an invisible, passive, entombed entity in some manner seeking an audience. The voice from the

tomb is fundamentally to be understood as a lonely one, an attitude typified in some of the Middle English lyrics of mortality. From their origins in sermon commonplaces, they exemplify the dead as beings peripheral to the experience of the living, but which still urge their reintegration. They highlight the loneliness of death in one of an array of strategies by didactic writers to re-emphasize the inevitable social, as well as physical, transformation of death. As we have seen, the traditional epitaph *Si quis eris qui transieris, sta, respice, plora*, just as often spoken by the crucified Christ, is one voiced here by the friendless dead, urging passersby to commemorate him.[21] The fourteenth-century preacher's commonplace book of Friar John of Grimestone, which we have already noted above, contains English verse used as sermon tags which similarly elaborate on this commonplace theme of abandonment and isolation in death. The following example reiterates the theme of loneliness in the same rhetoric witnessed in the lyric in Worcester Cathedral Library, MS F. 10 (see above):

> For I ham pore, withouten frendes,
> In grete pine among þe fendis,
> Wirmis mete day and nith,
> To hard rekning I am dith.[22]

The loneliness experienced by the dead even as they are eaten by worms and harried by demons is one of the several themes common to lyrics of mortality, not all of which can to be discussed fully here. They include the loss of beauty, the effects of decay, humiliation, the *ubi sunt* theme, and the image of the grave as house. In the above lyric, the conceit that these are lines spoken by the dead is made clear in the colophon on folio 87^{r}: 'Si fas esset loqui, quilebet mortuus posit dicere "Heu" propter quatuor' (This is how the dead would say 'alas' in four ways — *if* he could speak).

Fundamentally, the consequences of the transformation of the body into 'ugly carrion', which we have examined in detail in Chapter 1, above, is imagined here as having emotional consequences for the corpse itself and not, seemingly, the living who abandon it. In this affective mode, the psychological outlook of the dead body is conceived, in a humanizing manner, as something akin to exile. At issue here is how the lonely dead, the dead whose voices issue from the tomb become a phenomenon which internalizes the message of mortality for the living. Where the lyrics on death present the psychological aspect of dwelling in the

[21] Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, p. 344.

[22] 'Si fas esset loqui', in *Descriptive Index*, ed. by Wilson, pp. 25–27 (p. 27).

tomb, and *Disputation* the physical and expressly visual aspect of inhabiting it, the examples of Middle English tale collections studied above exploit the conceit of a vocal, entombed corpse attempting to make itself heard by the living in a cruder, less lyrical, but more dramatic fashion. Their concern is not with the emotions and psychological fact of being dead but the blunter purpose of reminding readers of the post-mortem punishment of sin. Nonetheless the tales, like some lyric verse, revolve around the dead as an unseen and therefore ignorable entity — unless it makes itself heard. Of importance to this discussion is to note how these examples (setting aside the very macabre *Disputation*) repudiate the direct monstrance of the emblem of the macabre cadaver whether within or outside of the tomb. The psychological claustrophobia of the tomb in the first-person lyrics quoted above eschew any presentation of the body's decay beyond the merely allusive — the fact of its decay and its emotional consequences are conceived to be a cause of anxiety principally for the dead speaker. This decay cannot be shown to an audience, but only described by those undergoing its process. The tales witnessed above similarly exploit the invisibility of the corpse. In the case of *Disputation*, the veil of the tomb is voyeuristically lifted aside so that we may not only hear the voice(s) of the tomb, but see the source of the complaint of the buried body. In the next chapter we will return to the this theme — the virtuosic realization of the macabre cadaver in English — where in two texts, the dead return to demonstrate the physical spectacle made of them in death.

but tell
Why thy canonized bones, hearséd in death,
Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre
Wherein we saw thee quietly interred
Hath oped his ponderous and marbled jaws,
To cast thee up again.

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Chapter 5

Romancing the Macabre: *The Three Dead* and their Legacy

This book began with an adventure in death: the encounter, in the wilderness, with the three dead kings of the sole English redaction of *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*.[1] We have already observed the 'romancing' tendency of this text in the way it achieves a narrative of adventure and suspense around the core exemplum. In this chapter we will read a Middle English romance that exploits this capacity still further. We will explore, in this chapter, how the central narrative exercise of *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead* — the reinscription of the Trental legend (the relief of a parent's agony in the afterlife) with the language and imagery of the macabre — is exploited in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Tarne Wathelyne*. This is a romance text extant in four fifteenth-century manuscripts. With it, and the *Legend* — whose thirteen-line alliterative stanza with end-rhyme, and probable date of composition of the early fifteenth century *Awntyrs* shares — we see the most explicit and comprehensive witnesses of the literary figuration of the macabre idiom in a secular genre.[2]

[1] See above, 'Introduction', pp. 1–2 n. 1: as noted there, references to this text are cited as *The Three Dead Kings*; references to the international medieval artistic and literary theme are cited as *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, or the *Legend*.

[2] Critical editions by Ralph Hanna, *The Awntyrs of Arthure* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), Thomas Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), and Stephen H. A. Shepherd, *Middle English Romances* (New York: Norton, 1995). Quotations with line numbers are from Hahn's edition.

We have seen in Chapter 1 a handful of Middle English romances (*Sir Triamour*, *Sir Amadace*, *The Squire of Low Degree*) marked by the roles that the decomposing dead play in them. These texts constitute examples of romances intriguingly inflected by hints of a morbid, if not macabre, sensibility. Whatever their 'macabre' component, *Amadace* and *Triamour* (together with *Amis and Amiloun)*, in their miraculous resolutions of narrative crux, clearly constitute 'homiletic' romances, partly adopting the pattern and motifs of exempla and hagiography. With *Amadace*, we encounter an expert assimilation and re-deployment of the folk and sermon trope of the grateful dead — a highly successful utilization which we might regret not witnessing more in Middle English romance, where we feel opportunities may well have existed. But, where loyal animals can be conscripted into the hero's service, we fail to witness a knight ever (for instance) pressing an army of grateful dead into support of his quest, however mouth-watering a narrative prospect this might seem, though something resembling it is admittedly realized to an extent in the Welsh *Mabinogion*.[3] In this narrative, dead Irish soldiers, cast into a cauldron of regeneration, re-emerge alive, as good as they were before, only now rendered permanently mute, a posture suggestive of soullessness. Certain roles were to be denied the dead, even in the most ostensibly didactic of romances. Yet, given the widespread presence of didactic and hagiographical formulae in medieval romance, the comparative rarity of the thematic use of the supernatural dead in the genre is striking. Some traces are indeed present — noisy, smoking tombs (a theme examined above, Chapter 4) are encountered in Malory. Yet where heroes and heroines frequently undergo pilgrimage and saintly penances, and like saints also regularly win the loyalty of animals (especially lions, the attribute of Jerome, and other saints) in texts such as *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Isumbras*, we must look a little harder still to find employed in romance didactic elements relating to the supernatural dead, and doubly so in their macabre modes of portrayal.

The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Tarne Wathelyne certainly constitutes the most intriguing incursion of the dead into romance narrative, yet the text remains romance, not exemplum, and remains too a distinctly episodic romance: it is not a single adventure, but two, and it is the bipartite aspect of the poem that has exercised most recent critical discussion. The first half of the poem is a ghost story — the episode with which we are concerned — dealing with the apparition of Guinevere's dead mother to her daughter and Sir Gawain to plead for her relief in Purgatory. The second half is a far more conventional Arthurian episode; the

[3] *The Mabinogion*, trans. by Lady Charlotte Guest (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 29.

challenge of a northern knight to Arthur's court. Yet both episodes achieve a single romance which is provocative in its adoption of the language of social complaint — from the ghost who speaks for both the plight of the souls of Purgatory and for the poor, and also by the northern knight Galeron who must petition Arthur for justice.

It is, then, the 'mother' episode — the appearance to Guinevere (and Gawain, who guards her) of her dead mother to plead for her relief in Purgatory — with which we are concerned. Suffrages promised, she offers, by way of 'gratitude' a prophecy of the fall of Arthur's Round Table. This is a prophecy that must fall on deaf ears, since nothing can arrest the mythological sweep of the descent of Arthurian romance into tragedy. This inevitability of death in a romance idiom now mandates an appropriate expression of *memento mori* for the Arthurian age and for Arthurian romance, in the shape of a talking cadaver.

Guinevere's mother is recognizable, at its simplest, as an invocation of a type of grateful dead narrative common in medieval exemplary writing which we have observed throughout this book, but more specifically, as we said at the outset of this chapter, a rewriting of another popular legend of the souls of Purgatory: the Trental legend (above, Chapter 3). Her apparition mirrors the patterns of the appearance of dead mothers to their children in the exempla we have already assessed in Chapter 3, above, but departs comprehensively in its deployment of specifically macabre, and not spiritual, imagery. Her description is unmistakably a verbal articulation of the pictorial formulation of the macabre cadaver or *transi*. Like the three fathers of *The Three Dead*, she is found unexpectedly, in the midst of an aristocratic hunt (that staple of chivalric romance, and especially romance in the alliterative idiom). Where, in its sister alliterative poems, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, and *The Avowing of Arthur* (the latter poem a manuscript companion in one of its witnesses, with *Sir Amadace*, the Ireland-Blackburne manuscript — Princeton, University Library, MS Taylor 41), the hunt leads to subsequent adventure (and morally improving adventure), it serves in *Awntyrs* and *The Three Dead* to prefigure a 'sombrely didactic vision of death' with gaiety.[4]

Awntyrs represents an example of the didactic and dramatic potential of the appearance of the dead exploited to the fullest. A supernatural appearance which, in the text, is presaged as portentously as any in romance, it occurs, as it should in the romance mode, 'fast byfore undre' (l. 73) — the time of undertide (between

[4] Thorlac Turville-Petre, '*Summer Sunday*, *De tribus regibus mortuis*, and *The Awntyrs off Arthure*: Three Poems in the Thirteen Line Stanza', *RES*, 25 (1974), 1–14 (p. 3).

9 a.m. and 3 p.m., the height of daytime) which is ever the time of incursion of the supernatural into the natural world in romance (and witnessed as such in another macabre incursion in *Death and Liffe* — see Chapter 6, below). As in 'archetypal' Middle English versions of the Trental legend (seen above, Chapter 3), the skies darken and the clouds burst. In *Awntyrs* this prompts the realistic consequence of scattering Arthur's hunting party, so that Gawain is left alone with the Queen. With this gesture, the author is ready to 'of this mervaile mele, if I mote' (ll. 74–77), and all of a sudden there is a manifestation amid the lake, which bursts into flame:

> There come a lowe [*fire*] one the loughe [*lake*] — in londe is not to layne —
> In the lyknes of Lucyfere, laytheste [*most loathed*] in Helle,
> And glides to Sir Gawayn the gates to gayne [*to bar his escape*]
>
> (ll. 83–85)

The ghost, at first evidently of infernal origin, takes its initial shape in flame. It can be identified only by what it deigns to announce of itself, and its cries are terrible: 'Hit yaules, hit yameres, with waymynges wete, | And seid, with siking sare, "I ban the body me bare!"' (ll. 87–89). At the very outset the audience is given an index of its former humanity — it rues the day it was born.

Gawain scrambles to console the Queen, pronouncing the event to be but an eclipse, but then concedes it to be 'the grisselist goost' he has ever heard groan. We are now told of the appearance of the body in a full inventory of its grisly attributes, from top to toe, in the macabre idiom. It is a cadaver, appearing exactly as would a long-dead corpse dredged from the same lake. Its naked body reveals bones protruding through the skin: 'Bare was the body and blak to the bone'. The corpse is encrusted with the filth of the tomb: 'Al biclagged in clay uncomly cladde' (ll. 104–05). It resembles a female only in its wailing, we are told; the author shies away from the description of a nude female body, however progressed in decay: 'Hit waried, hit wayment as a woman, | But on hide ne on huwe no heling hit hadde' (ll. 106–07). In another figuration of this ubiquitous motif of the dead, toads have travelled with the body from the grave and the hereafter, nestling on the skull (see above, Chapter 4, on the didactic trope of toads). As a cadaver, she is infested by 'serpents' — worms of the grave, serpents of Purgatory (ll. 115, 120). This creature is not simply an animated corpse, but carries attributes of the spirits whose visible forms are visibly inscribed with the visceral yet incorporeal tortures of purgation. She is an embodied ghost, first having solidified in a nimbus of flame (just as Gregory's mother is actualized within a thick darkness; see above, Chapter 4). She floats as a ghost-light above the lake, which may conceal the entrance to Purgatory itself. Stephen Shepherd here notes the

ambiguities of the solid and evanescent potential of the figuration of the ghost in the synonymic reiteration of terms for the dead as *lau* (flame), *goost*, *sprete*, and *bodi*: 'an impression is thus constructed of a creature at once of this world and ethereal, decomposing but aflame'.[5]

Such metamorphic qualities reflect versatile and flexible conventions and traditions in imagining the dead. They are attributes that are also found in perhaps the most famous English ghost stories of the Middle Ages, the Latin stories of the Monk of Byland, found scribbled (uniquely) in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century (since internally Richard II is referred to historically) into a twelfth- or thirteenth-century manuscript, BL, MS Royal 15 A. xx. These medieval Latin accounts of local supernatural ongoings in Yorkshire describe shape-shifting ghosts, liable to assume the shape of flame, animals, and also — crucially — the three dead kings, in an index of the visual theme's currency in the late fourteenth century, witnessed in the tale of a tailor of the name of Snowball:

> Qui demum venit in figura capre et ter circa iuit circulum prefatum dicendo a. a. a qua coniurata cecidit prona in terra et resurrexit in figura hominis magne stature et horribilis et macilenti ad instar unius regis mortui depicti.
>
> (The ghost appeared in the form of a goat, and walked three times around the circle saying a, a, a. After it had been conjured, it fell flat on the ground and got up in the form of a man of huge stature both horrible and emaciated, like the image of one of those paintings of the dead kings.)[6]

Thus, we have a singular allusion to the iconographic currency and parochial penetration of the image and theme of the three dead kings. In addition, we have a marvellous sense of the appreciation of the scale of the image in mural contexts, in the Monk of Byland's tale of Snowball (one of four discrete episodes). We see too how this is aligned and intercalated with more anomalous, 'spiritual' qualities, just as these qualities are intermeshed in *Awntyrs* in the figure of the ghost.

Gawain, of course, as an exemplary hero, does not fear even the approach of this shape-shifting dead. Here in yet another romance vision of his confronting the supernatural, he stands firm: 'Agayn the grisly goost Sir Gawayn is gone; | He rayked oute at a res, for he was never drad'(ll. 111–13). The dogs and woodland birds however exhibit the fear animals are traditionally observed to show for the paranormal, nature showing itself aghast at this invasion from beyond:

[5] *Middle English Romances*, ed. by Shepherd, p. 368.

[6] Edited by M. R. James in 'Twelve Medieval Ghost-Stories', *English Historical Review*, 37 (1922), 413–23 (repr. in *The Haunted Dolls' House and Other Ghost Stories*, II: *The Complete Ghost Stories of M. R. James*, ed. by S. T. Joshi, trans. by Barbara Joshi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006), pp. 223–45 (pp. 225–33)).

> The houndes highen to the holtes, and her hede hides,
> For the grisly goost made a grym bere [*cry*].
> The grete greundes wer agast of the grym bere [*body*].
> The birdes in the bowes,
> That on the goost glowes,
> Thei skryke in the skowes
> That hatheles [*nobles*] may here.
>
> (ll. 124–30)

As Gawain conjures her, she describes her nature as a Christian spirit. She serves out her purgatory on earth (the word *purgatory* itself is never used, but is to be understood), within the lake and its woods, as well as in 'another place' — topographical distinctions which we have already observed in *The Gast of Gy*. As the interview draws to a close she tells how she must journey to her 'other place' — 'I mot walke on my wey thorgh this wilde wode | Unto my wonying-stid in wo for to well' (ll. 315–16). Just as Guy would purge himself in a common (subterrestrial) and a partable (earthly) purgatory, the ghost of Guinevere's mother seemingly commutes between two purgatories, as does Hamlet's father:

> Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
> And for the day confined to fast in fires,
> Til the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purged away.
>
> (I. 5. 10–13)

Yet whatever the ambiguities of the exact places of her purgation (we are in no way supplied with the details evident in Guy's or even *Hamlet*'s account), all the while she is explicitly aware of her decay as a body in the earth; she is both corrupt cadaver and tortured soul. She appears now she says, to speak to Guinevere, her daughter: 'I was of figure and face fairest of alle, | God has me geven of his grace | To dre my paynes in this place' (ll. 136, 140–41). She is tormented by the very earth of her burial which encrusts her, and anxious to speed its ending, she must speak to the Queen:

> Into care am I caught and couched in clay.
> Lo, sir curtays knyght,
> How delfulle deth has me dight!
> Lete me onys have a sight
> Of Gaynour the gay.
>
> (ll. 152–56)

Gawain brings the young woman 'to the body', the poet explicitly describing her here, as elsewhere, as a cadaver (l. 158). The ghost hails her as courteously as she would have in life, identifies herself as Guinevere's mother and repeats her macabre self-monstrance. Her language here is exactly that of the epitaph, the *memento mori* — as I am, so shall you be — she is a fully-fledged salutary 'mirror' against worldly vanity:

> Lo, how delful deth has thi dame dight [*shaped*]!
> I was radder of rode [*redder of cheek*] then rose in the ron [*on the briar*],
> My ler [*face*] as the lelé [*lilly*] lonched on hight [*shone on height*].
> Now am I a graceles gost, and grisly I gron;
> With Lucyfer in a lake logh [*low*] am I light [*laid*].
> Thus am I lyke to Lucefere: takis witnes by mee!
> For al thi fressh foroure [*fur garments*],
> Muse on my mirrour;
> For, king and emperour,
> Thus dight shul ye be.
>
> (ll. 160–69)

As part of her dual purgation on earth, she resides, she says, with Lucifer in the lake. This is a more poetically licensed imagining of her fate which is not to be rationalized fully as doctrinally correct. She is like Lucifer in her fall from high estate and pride, but not, we assume, in Hell, even if she must, for the poet, alliterate in this line!

The ghost turns to her homily, wherein she castigates her daughter and the nobility for neglect and disdain of the poor. In a mode constantly rehearsed by sermonists, she aligns her spiritual need for prayer with the material deprivation of the poor. Her parting words, delivered a little later, make this explicit, in a phrase chillingly redolent of the hungry dead of Purgatory:

> Fede folke for my sake that failen the fode
> And menge me with matens and Masse in melle.
> Masses arn medecynes to us that bale bides;
> Us thenke a Masse as swete
> As eny spice that ever ye yete.
>
> (ll. 319–23)

Prior to this, she documents her daily torments in Purgatory's prison, contrasting them with her daughter's life of ceaseless luxury, a life she too once enjoyed:

> With riche dayntés on des thi diotes ar dight,
> And I, in danger and doel, in dongone I dwelle,

Naxte and nedefull, naked on night.
Ther folo me a ferde of fendes of Helle;
They hurle me unhendely; thei harme me in hight;
In bras and in brymston I bren as a belle.
Was never wrought in this world a wofuller wight.
Hit were ful tore any tonge my turment to telle;
Nowe wil Y of my turment tel or I go.
Thenk hertly on this —
Fonde to mende thi mys.
Thou art warned ywys:
Be war be my wo.
(ll. 183–95)

If her cadaverous appearance is insufficient to induce sober reflection on death, then the description of infernal purgation, in the two-pronged strategy of the preacher — the rot of the grave and the agony of otherworldly flame — assuredly will. This testimony, finally, is more than Guinevere can bear, and, according to the narrative pattern of the Trental legend, asks, in anguish, what can help her mother; she cannot endure the sight of her mother's burning bones, physical rot, or torment:

Say sothely what may the saven of thi sytis
And I shal make sere men to singe for thi sake.
But the baleful bestes that on thi body bites
Al blendis my ble — thi bones arn so blake!
(ll. 209–12)

Confessing the sin that drew her to Purgatory — adulterous love — the ghost requests a Trental of Trentals: thirty times a series of thirty masses, to be sung that very morning (ll. 213, 218–21). It appears that Guinevere intends a lavish suffrage which would require the work of more than one chantry. Such testimonies are factually documented by Middle English wills. The Lancastrian statesman Archbishop Henry Bowet of York for instance († 1423), willed money *pro mille missis celebrandis more trentale Sancti Gregorii* — for a thousand masses to be said in the form of *The Trental of St Gregory*.[7] Guinevere, accordingly, to ensure her mother's delivery promises 'a myllion of masses to make mynning!' — just to be on the safe side (l. 236).

[7] *Sir Gawain*, ed. by Hahn, pp. 208–09 n. 236.

Her mother's visitation is now at an end: she must continue to tread her path in terrestrial limbo as long as her consignment to Purgatory endures, where mere hours on earth are translated to years in the Otherworld : 'I have no lenger tome tidinges to telle | I mot walke on my wey thorgh this wilde wode | In my wonyngstid in wo for to welle' (ll. 314–16). With a final injunction to think on her for their own good, she glides away with a groan (l. 325). Her departure is marked by nature's sigh of relief, bookending the vision with the signs that signalled its commencement: 'The wyndes, the weders, the welken unhides | Then unclosed the cloudes, the son con shene' (ll. 328–29). Thus are 'selcouth' wonders brought to a close in *Awntyrs*.

The idea of the macabre is instrumental in interpreting the apparition in *Awntyrs*. Far more than a mere reworking of the Trental legend, the ghost represents a clear allusion to the imagery, and more specifically to the verbal achievement of macabre imagery in English poetry, in the *Legend*, whose store of images for the description of the dead body, as we will see, it shares. She also prompts far more reflection on the physical ravages of death than any ghost (if not corpse) we have hitherto examined; she becomes in herself an effigial monstrance: a reminder of death, and injunction against vanity, much like the Body of the *Disputation* (above, Chapter 4). In her repeated juxtaposition of her former beauty with her present decay she adduces the art of the double *transi* tomb — the sculpted doubling of the living likeness of the dead with that of its decaying corpse — to her makeup. We simultaneously perceive her appearance as rose-red, and lily-white as it was in youth 'radder of rode then rose in the ron', as well as wracked with 'wilde wormes' in death (l. 216).

The author of the poem has staged a perfect interruption of death into life, in a generic setting where the intrusion of such an exemplum trope will be doubly emphatic. A kingly hunt, emblematic of pride and life, and in the alliterative mode always liable to meaningful interruption, is upstaged by a raging corpse. After the ghost of *Awntyrs* has gone (chivalric) life goes on — for the time being. Contrary to any expectations of the genre, no one is slain, but a reminder of the death inevitable to all is delivered from beyond the grave itself by one who would have ridden with them only a short time ago. In delivering her prophecy of doom for the Round Table, the near-at-hand withering of the flower of chivalry, she becomes a reminder, indeed a prophecy, of death for all of Arthur's court — and what reminder could be better served but by a corpse? What emerges too from this rotten figure is a suggestion of the corruption of the world in which it appears; a romance world gone to rot itself. According to the ghost, these flowers of chivalry are over-proud and neglectful of their duties to the poor. The corpse, too, in its plea for suffrages, becomes a surrogate for the poor of this world, a

theme of poverty lent tantalizingly programmatic significance in one of the manuscript contexts of this romance. In the Ireland-Blackburne manuscript, *Awntyrs* is anthologized with the romance *Sir Amdace* (above, Chapter 1), a text itself very interested in poverty and death (and debt). Gawain, by his own words, acknowledges that his class is abusing its temporal power:

> How shal we fare, quod the freke, that fonden to fight,
> And thus defoulen the folke on fele kinges londes,
> And riches over reymes withouten eny right,
> Wynnen worshipp in werre thorgh wightnesse of hondes?
> (ll. 261–64)

Still, romance, and life, goes on — but only for the time being, and not without its discontents. Such Arthurian 'imperialism' outlined by Gawain's honest admission of Arthurian misrule, is articulated further as the knight Galeron accuses Arthur of wrongful suzerainty over his lands in the second half of the poem. Alliterative poetry has a habit of broaching social criticism, but seldom does alliterative romance (as here), stray beyond a tendency to quasi -cinematic descriptions of the horrors of war to searching criticism of misrule.

The narrative potential of using the dead as both admonishment and as romance wonder and entertainment, and, still further, as stimulus to wider ethical criticism is therefore clear in this romance text, as is its concomitant strategy of suggesting iconographic currency in its narrative art. At every opportunity, the author is at pains to support the apparition with descriptive embellishments which place the supernatural incursion in a vivid natural setting. The ghost is not a bland trope to be pasted into the text: its impact on its surroundings is portrayed as palpable and manifold. The dead woman appals nature, appearing in broad daylight, supplanting the sun with storm clouds, sending birds and dogs into a panic, and terrifying her daughter. Not appearing in a church or graveyard as in our other examples, her place of haunting is most evocative. Like an infernal Lady of the Lake, she inhabits the depths of the tarn, and the forest groves surrounding it. She is first evoked by the natural phenomenon — and though adorned by the frogs and serpents conventional to hellish torture, we have seen here, as elsewhere, that they serve as naturalistic emblems of the body's habitation of the tomb. She is vocal and articulate in her testimony, and at the end, does not vanish into thin air, but departs slowly 'thorgh the greves grene' (l. 327). Her appearance is every bit as lingering in the moral shadow it casts over the rest of this chivalric excursion. Even amid the most dazzling of courts, among the fairest of folk, and, conveyed with the vehicle of the most gorgeously wrought verse, the dead are always with the living.

Verbalizing the Image in 'The Three Dead Kings'

We have already familiarized ourselves with this text and its significance. *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* is, together with the *Danse Macabre*, the critical conjunction of macabre art and writing in the Middle Ages and, moreover, the principal thematic font of the subject. The English redaction of the *Legend*, written in the same elaborate stanza form and alliterative metre as *Awntyrs*, exists solely in the poet and scribe John Audelay's manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 302, fol. 34^{r-v}), under the rubric *De tribus regibus mortuis*.

Behind the narrative of the *Legend* lies a shade of a universal anecdote which wound its way into wide currency and into a literary tradition.[8] In its earliest thirteenth-century Latin forms, the narrative that becomes the *Legend* recounts simply three men who stumble across a corpse while abroad. The encounter registered in this version, the *Cum apertam sepulturam*, is of the most elemental simplicity, eschewing any trace of the supernatural. Here, the (single) corpse is not accorded speech (still less is it any blood-relation of the living men). But it is a sight that affects the three adventurers profoundly, as they reflect on the humility and fragility of all flesh, and the horror of its appearance in death. In the hands of French poets of the thirteenth century, beginning with Baudouin de Condé's *Dit des trois morts et des trois vifs*, the dead are multiplied so that each of the living is offset by his own *mort*.[9] The corpses speak, themselves enunciating the horror of their death instead of leaving it to the living; they acquire agency and even emerge to intercept the living, rather than the living stumbling across them.[10]

[8] In a tale that bears certain similarities, a Dominican chronicler of Colmar in thirteenth-century Germany recounts how a man, travelling by a river, was seriously wounded by three mounted dead men whom he recognizes as having died recently. See Rudolf von Schlettstadt's tale in *Historiae memorabiles: Zur Dominikanerliteratur und Kulturgeschichte des 13. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Erich Kleinschmidt (Cologne: Böhlau, 1974), pp. 110–11; Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 30.

[9] Accounts of the legend's development in Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, pp. 196–205; and Binski, *Medieval Death*, pp. 134–38. Edition and study of the French versions in *Les Cinq Poemes de trois morts et des trois vifs*, ed. by Stefan Glixelli (Paris: Champion, 1914). Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Late Middle Ages*, ed. by H. Bobber, trans. by M. Matthews (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 329, cites the twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Flemish poet Hèlinand de Froidmont (who composed a fifty-stanza apostrophe to death, *Les Vers de la mort*) as its original author.

[10] They resemble nothing so much as doppelgängers — see Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, p. 3, for an account of the pagan Germanic notion of the post-mortem double, or *hamr*, that survives after death.

The *Legend*'s iconographic figuration originates in the north of France, in the circle of the illuminator Jean Pucelle, and seems to have acquired iconographic popularity by the beginning of the fourteenth century.[11] The three dead men are pictured at times resting immobile in coffins (recumbent and upright), or mounted on horses. Italian versions tend to depict the living so mounted, confronting tomb-emergent skeletons.[12] Increasingly, the dead are depicted as standing, becoming indistinguishable from the predatory, vigorous figure of Death. Not only does the legend decorate high-end manuscripts (psalters and *horae*) for private devotion, but, in a demotic impulse, the *Legend* finds wide spread parochial dissemination in insular contexts: some forty versions of the *Legend* survive in Britain, with one in Ireland (Abbey Knockmoy, Co. Galway) all in varying states of repair, and we have already observed (above), in one of the tales of the Monk of Byland, an index of the one-time currency of the *Legend* in parochial mural contexts.

The English text in the Audelay manuscript becomes in one sense, a rationalizing foundation legend for a theme in parochial art. The *Legend*'s significance derives from its dual iconographic tradition, a history of which the English text is reflexively aware, and which originates apparently simultaneously with the exemplary narrative. However, it is more elitist media which afford the earliest-surviving representatives of the *Legend* in art in England: the Psalter of Robert de Lisle (BL, MS Arundel 83 II) (Plate 4).[13] The psalter bears a holographic inscription by Lisle (1288–1344), dedicating the book first to his eldest, then to his surviving daughters (nuns of Chicksands Priory in Bedfordshire), dated 25 November 1339, though the manuscript itself is datable to around 1308.[14] In this lavishly illuminated book (whose actual psalter text is now lost), the *Legend* (fol. 127^{r}) is positioned after depictions of the Tree of Life (on fol. 125^{v}), and the twelve attributes of human existence with the wheel of the Ten Ages of Man (on fol. 126, both sides). The *Legend* is thus a summation of the iconographic and schematic treatments of human mortality in the manuscript.

[11] Lucy Freeman Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle in the British Library* (London: Harvey Miller, 1983), p. 105 n. 89.

[12] As in Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, MS 1404; Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle*, p. 105.

[13] Transcription of text in Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle*, p. 125; discussion with graphic reproduction p. 42.

[14] Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle*, pp. 11 and 17; Ingo. F. Walther, *Codices Illustres* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001), p. 200.

On the single page accorded to the *Legend*, the three dead are arrayed standing directly opposite the three living kings. Their postures are a perfectly symmetrical mirror image of each other, while their appearance remains a morbid parody of the other — youthful vanity answered by rank decay, and vice versa. Kings one and two, both living and dead, touch each other in an almost effete gesture. The third living and dead stand apart — the living with an expression of recoil as he gazes on the dead, while the third dead gazes not at the living arrayed opposite him but outwards at the real subject of their admonition, the reader, with an insidious, knowing leer. Each of the three dead is in an almost identical state of decomposition — yet physical variegation between the three is registered subtly between them, allowing for the evocation of the 'horrid diversity' which the appalled first living king speaks of in the Lisle text, a redaction of a French version of the *Legend* by Nicole de Margival:

> De grant pour le quoer me tremble.
> Veez la treis mors ensemble,
> Cum il sunt hidous & divers,
> Purriz & mangez des vers.
>
> (With great fear my heart trembles.
> See the three corpses together,
> How hideous they are and diverse,
> Putrid and devoured of worms.)

What is intriguing about the psalter is how the theme is presented in a linguistic and material matrix, with image, and with plural languages: French narrative, Latin rubrication, and finally the English vernacular used to reiterate or gloss the human, emotional response, towards the dead. Each living king says in turn, 'Ich am afert; lo what ich se; me thynkyth it be devils thre', to which the dead respond with homiletic asperity: 'Ich wes well fair; such shaltthow be; for godes love be ware be me.' The alliterative version of the *Legend* in the Audelay MS arguably takes us further down this route of English vernacularization. The English poem is far more than a 'barebones' exemplum, but a narrative which is almost romance — priming it ultimately for a full-scale insertion into a romance context in *Awntyrs*. In English mural art, such as the representation of the *Legend* in Raunds, Northampton (Plates 5 and 6), we see even here in the parochial, pictorial vernacular signs of forests and the hunt as emblems of the world which can only be repudiated by the sight of the destination of all flesh in the dead, and which demand elaboration more fully in a systematically realized world of romance chivalry in *Awntyrs*.

The Lisle iconographer translates the *Legend* out of nature however, so that nothing can offset or contextualize the opposition of life and death. Though the artist might be thought to take his cue from the exact imagery of the Lisle text, both the literary and pictorial attributes of the dead were by now well established in French poetry on the subject by Condé and his imitators in the latter half of the thirteenth century, and the iconographers of the early fourteenth. The text is recognizable as a reduced adaptation of an anonymous version of the *dit* 'Compains, vois tu ce que je vois', ultimately derived from Nicole de Margival's version, 'Troi damoisel furent jadis'.[15] The same text (in full) is used in *Les Petit heures* of Jean, Duc de Berry, which also illustrates the *Legend* alongside it.[16] The anonymous treatment in the Lisle psalter is the most brief and basic of literary reductions, a dialogic summary of more extensive narrative poems, yet the correspondences of pictorial and literary description ultimately achieved in the Lisle *Legend* are striking, even if not unique. The illuminator of the *Legend* (one of two artists apparent in the manuscript), probably one Master Thomas, by no means confines himself to the limited imagery afforded by the text of the Lisle *Legend*. He elaborates his corpses still further in modes witnessed in these other visual representations, and is here, as elsewhere in his work for the manuscript, heavily influenced by the school of the northern French artist Jean Pucelle, who was active in the period 1319–35.[17]

Pictorial distinction is lent the three corpses primarily in the rendition of the viscera: maggots teem over the stomach cavity viscera of the first dead king, while the wholly naked third dead king is utterly disembowelled — hollowed out by his embalmers to the extent that we see his backbone. Each of the dead has the remnants of dried, mummified brown flesh stretched over a skeletal frame; none is capable of more than a skull-like *rictus* for a grin. Eyeless, lipless, noseless, hairless, they are nonetheless in their attitude and posture acutely sensitive to the living before them, heads gracefully inclined or regally erect. One of the principal motifs the miniature in the Lisle psalter shares with other versions of the *Legend* influenced by Pucelle is the goshawk on the hand of the first living king, an attribute mentioned in the accompanying Lisle text:

[15] *Les Cinq Poemes*, ed. by Glixelli, p. 14.

[16] BnF, MS lat. 18014, fols 282^{r}–286^{r}. See Glixelli's tabulation of manuscripts (some illustrated) of the *Legend* (*Les Cinq Poemes*, pp. 4–5); 'Conpains, vois tu ce que je vois' is edited on pp. 83–91.

[17] Walther, *Codices Illustres*, p. 200.

Ly premer mort dist damoysel
Ne ubliez pas pur sel oysel,
Ne pur vos robes a orfreis,
Qe vous ne tiegnez bien les leys
Qe ihesu crist ad ordiné
De sa seinte volunté.

(The first corpse says: young man
forget not for (the sake of) that bird,
nor for those rich robes,
that you bide well the laws
that Jesus Christ has us ordained
Of his holy will.)

Other such pictorial versions of the *Legend* feature the bird, in manuscripts such as Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 3142, folio 311^{v}. This example is very close to the Lisle version in the figures' clothing, posture, together with the figuration of the bird on the hand of the first living. Here also, two of the corpses are clothed in their decaying cerements and the third one is nude, just as in Lisle. In the text of the Lisle psalter, the graphically naked corpse (unashamedly gazing out at the viewer) describes himself as naked in his speech. Greatest of the three in life according to his own testimony, in death he exceeds the other dead in abasement:

Ieo fu de mon lynage chief,
Princes reys & conustables
Beals et riches ioyanz mes tables.
Ore su si hidous & si nuz,
Ke moy ver ne deigne nulls.

(Of my line I was chief,
Princes kings and constables
Fair and rich rejoiced at my feast.
Yet now so hideous and as naked am I,
That even worms disdain me.)

There is a close, coeval English iconographic analogue also in the Taymouth Hours (BL, MS Yates Thompson 13), illustrating the Office of the Dead, albeit an analogue more crudely drawn. Here, the living and the dead each appear across the fold of the manuscript on separate folios (179^{v}–180^{r}). Still prominent however is the presence of the goshawk and the nakedness of the third corpse (Plates 7 and 8). Singulary noticeable is the English dialogue for the three dead: precisely the same as the Arundel psalter (the dialogue for the living is truncated).

The representation of the *Legend* in the mid-fourteenth-century Psalter and Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg takes the interest in the faithful representation of decay to an altogether more exalted level of macabre interest (Plate 9). This representation highlights Italian influence in the depiction of mounted living kings — a motif preferred in Italian frescoes on the subject.[18] Yet, as with members of the Pucelle school, the three dead are progressively denuded until the third is left naked. However, this progression in nakedness is matched by an analogous progression in physical decomposition. Each of the dead is unmistakeably cast prematurely out of a grave which has begun to devour them — all except, perhaps, the first, who still appears to await his burial, clad in voluminous white burial sheets as yet unspoilt by burial in the earth. Here, the third corpse is complemented and offset by the first corpse, who, fully clothed, is also the best preserved. His features have only just begun to rot: his facial physiognomy is still discernible as it would have been in life, marked only by a profound blackening of the flesh and lips, and seemingly bleeding or dissolving eyes, all extravagantly rendered by the artist. He is fully clothed in white sheets, still aware of a need to conserve the modesty of his lingering flesh. The central corpse imperfectly mediates between the two stages of decomposition represented by the first and third corpses. A true mummy, his caramel-coloured, dried flesh still clings to his body. As with the corpses of the Lisle psalter, his facial tissues have decayed so that his head is little more than a skull. He, like the third corpse, has lost the contents of his eye sockets, his hair, nose, and lips. He almost coyly carries the tattered remains of his cerements about his shoulders, disclosing swollen pudenda beneath a yet un-ruptured viscera. The third corpse's abdomen is lively with corruption, as the rotting viscera tentatively remain lodged within the stomach cavity. Tattered scraps of sun-dried flesh cling to the corpse's leg bones. Exceeding the artist's competence in realistic representation, the corpse's xylophone-like rib cage is exposed to the onlooker, the flesh having long left it. The overall effect of this macabre tableau, relishing decay as something akin to the three ages of the corpse, represents an acute awareness of, and artistic interest in, the pathological process and stages of decay on the human body.

We have seen (above, Introduction) the opening of the Audelay text of the *Legend*. It matches *Awntyrs* in its foregrounding of the descriptive delights of decomposing flesh. Both texts, though roughly coeval, cannot be argued to be a model for each other; alliterative poetry tends to share formulaic and verbal material without one text ever becoming identifiable as either exemplar or imitation. Yet, we have

[18] Walther, *Codices Illustres*, p. 219.

a sense here of a subsidiary school of alliterative verse, a sense of an alliterative aesthetic for the ghoulish and ghastly, as Susanna Fein has elsewhere observed.[19]

As we have already seen, from the Audelay text (in the passage with which we began this book), as the three living kings are stricken by blanket fog, the three dead emerge from a thicket, not expressly a graveyard as in some French versions, but rather the middle of a live hunt:

> Shoken out of a schawe thre schalkys ischeue,
> Schadows vnshene were chapid to chow,
> With lymes long and lene and leggys ful lew.
> Hadyn lost the lyp and the lyuer sethyn thai were layd lowe.
> (ll. 42–45)

Terror of the dead is the initial reaction of all the living, whether animal or human. The horses snort, and the kings restrain their bridles and bless themselves, as the dead silently beckon them (ll. 47–52). Here, as with *Awntyrs*, is a consciously artistic, quasi-romance rendering of the encounter of the living and the dead. The supernatural emerges from a concretely realized, detailed setting. It is an apparition heralded by crepuscular mists, and the panic of losing one's way in the forest, which may be read as the *selva oscura* of life. They are ghosts from the first word — shades, with the emaciated limbs and exposed innards of cadavers.

The imagery associated with the manifestation of the corpses is evocatively embellished, yet the nature and circumstance of their appearance is never anything other than ambivalent. At least one of the dead is described as standing by his coffin, yet we do not know if he has emerged from it or remains within it. As does the audience, each of the living diagnoses the apparition as a supernatural one, if not always accurately. The first one is 'agast | Of thre gostis ful grym'. Though he has travelled much in the wilds, he has never seen such a marvel: the encounter with the dead is here is thus acknowledged to be one beyond the nerve and span of mortal experience (ll. 57–62). The third king's fear of the dead is exquisitely sketched. Hiding his head with his hands, he acknowledges feeling 'a carful knyl to his hert coldis | So doth the knife' (ll. 80–82). His heart, he says, fares as folded rushes (l. 85), and he alone of them counsels fleeing those he describes as warlocks (l. 83) and devils (l. 90), even though the second living king's previously uttered reaction to the dead is that fleeing them would be fatal (ll. 72–78). This misdiagnosis of the nature of the revenants is matched in the vernacular captions to the Anglo-Norman Lisle text, as the third king exclaims 'me thinketh hit beth deueles thre'.

[19] See Susanna Greer Fein, 'The Ghoulish and the Ghastly: A Moral Aesthetic in Middle English Alliterative Verse', *MLQ*, 48 (1987), 3–19.

It is this crucial misinterpretation, the confusion of the ghosts representing Death for devils, which spurs the dead to speak: 'Nay, are we no fyndus [...] | We wer your faders of fold' (ll. 92–93). The first corpse castigates the sons' delight in life and their tyranny in rule. He berates their negligence for their fathers' souls — 'we haue made youe mastyrs amys | That now nyl not mynn vs with a mas' (ll. 103–04). The second ghost interjects, brandishing his long-rotted remains at the onlookers — 'Lokys on my bonus that blake bene and bare' (l. 106). His homily urges rejection of the flesh, which will come only to fail its wearer thus in decay. The third, most 'terrible' dead king in the French texts as here (by his own words) lays bare their purpose in appearing to the living: 'Makis your merour be me! My myrthus bene mene' (l. 120). Thus the three dead are a warning and mirror of death, and suggest their capacity for wider implications of social complaint elaborated in *Awntyrs*. Each of them laments his own misrule and rapacity in life, yet they say nothing of their fate in the afterlife other than obliquely citing a certain lack of mirth. In this way, the decorum of the original legend, consisting of a *vanitas* meditation on a corpse, is preserved — this is a meditation on death, not a contemplation of the punishments of the hereafter. The macabre face of death is its own sanction.

The dead ultimately dismiss themselves; they are out of whatever time was graced them and return to their graves (ll. 131–32). It is now sunset and the sons depart gladly. We have already observed the significance of the poems' coda. The poet (if not, perhaps Blind Audelay himself as he describes himself at the end of his manuscript) bookends the tale in a manner fully cognizant of the *Legend*'s iconographic milieu: acknowledging the widespread presence of church murals in England of the *Legend* (he specifies this over its presence in books), this, he says is how the mural came to be first painted, when the three sons erected a church for their fathers, yet too few will believe it, alas (ll. 139–42). Whether or not the story was given credence, the *Legend*'s forty parochial witnesses in Britain far exceed those of the Dance of Death whose social-levelling commentary may have been a little too discomforting in post–Peasants' Revolt England.[20] Nevertheless, only one version of *The Legend* exists in English poetry of the Middle Ages.

In *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *The Three Dead*, we are confronted with the corpse as *memento mori* in literary modes that exploit the didactic potential of the dead in their macabre guise amid a structure which emphasizes art and adventure as much as admonishment. The dead are wielded as loci of horror, both in their carefully formulated appearance, which replicates the characteristics of

[20] Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, p. 203.

the macabre cadaver in a visual manner, and also in a psychological mode as the supernatural other — as the dead which prompt an unspoken fear in a mode of superstitious apprehension. These texts exemplify a dramatic trope of the fear of the dead, one manifest in the dramatic gestures displayed in the reaction of nature to their apparition and in the stylized emotional responses of the living.

Similar in their elaborate language, dialect, and versification, perhaps even belonging to a school of 'macabre' alliterative verse as Fein suggests, the implications for an audience keen to experience the macabre vogue in a literary guise can only be hypothesized given the correspondences of these two texts. Chance has been kinder to *Awntyrs* in its manuscript state, the text's survival in four independent manuscripts testifying to a one-time popularity. Whether *The Three Dead* is an isolated English example of a more widespread literary explication of the art and narrative of the *Legend* cannot be answered here. Woolf, indeed, argues that the themes they represent 'were not made fully at home' in English poetry.[21] Nevertheless, it can be argued that the macabre idiom inspired highly elaborate literary responses in these two texts by English writers, whatever their consequent popularity as verbal themes (their iconographic popularity is indisputable). Where *The Three Dead* can perhaps be regarded as a free translation (closest, but not identical to the German or Dutch versions of the original French poems), *Awntyrs* is a unique deployment of the macabre in the romance mode in its explicit, and not merely allusive, references to the iconography of the macabre, highlighting an authorial awareness for the idiom's potential to augment romance methods of exploring the supernatural.

In having assessed over five chapters the representation of the dead as a warning of death, we now turn to discuss, in Chapters 6 and 7, the theme of the dead human body representing death itself in a more explicit manner. In the two concluding sections of this study, we will see how Death is anthropomorphized in the macabre bodies of dead. The warning of mortality from those who have experienced it becomes the warning of *mors* from that which *inflicts* it, from its own mouth.

[21] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 344.

Between the ages of five and nine, children personify death as an individual or as a dead person.

—Maria Nagy, psychologist

Thus sayth he techyng his good chyldryn, forto haue yn mynde how hard he is vmbstad wyth deth on yche syde yn so moch, That he may not away-scape; but euer dethe sewyth hym with hys bow drawen and an arrow.

—John Mirk, *Festial*

Here's a stay
That shakes the rotten carcass of old Death
Out of his rags.

—Shakespeare, *King John*

Chapter 6

Death, apostrophe: embodying death

In her history of the medieval English lyric, Rosemary Woolf observes how one aspect related to the macabre idea, the personification of death, is a theme which only gains popularity in the Middle English lyric in the fifteenth century. Hitherto, the primary narrative vehicles for the discourse of mortality had been the voices of the dead themselves, whose roles we have already assessed.[1] This mode of expression is not discontinued — notable late medieval examples of the motif in lyric contexts include the *Lamentacio peccatoris*, a text widely disseminated in romance manuscripts, and still later, John Skelton's 'Lament of the Soul of Edward IV', a first-person epitaph using traditional morbid imagery appropriate for the commemoration of a monarch who wanted a cadaver tomb for himself (above, Chapter 1).[2] This poem, Skelton 'laureat's' first commission, may indeed have been intended to accompany the tomb, had it been executed, though it is not known (to my knowledge) if this has been demonstrated.

In fifteenth-century English writing, voices from the tomb persist, but now the voice of Death itself is added to that of his victims. In some lyrics (such as those of John Lydgate in MS Douce 322) the image of Death as a macabre cadaver and spearman is even provided in illustration alongside the text, and we have already documented the predatory postures of personified Death in that

[1] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 336.

[2] Skelton, John, 'Lament of the Soul of Edward IV', in *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Carleton Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), pp. 250–53.

singularly macabre book, MS Add. 37049 (above, Chapter 4).[3] This chapter turns to a contextual reading of the personified representation of death in the macabre idiom in a range of Middle English texts. It cannot hope, needless to say, to document every appearance of this commonplace. Our approach here is to neglect rhetorical apostrophes to death, and those citations of the persona without sufficiently complex modes of representation, to concentrate on the adaptation of the specifically macabre bodies of the dead for the allegorical figure of Death itself.

Regardless of its more modish deployment in the macabre idiom in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Death is no more new a theme in the literature of the Middle Ages than is the representation of the dead. Death has been embodied in every cultural system, both ancient and modern, in a myriad of guises. In ancient and modern folklore death is aligned corporatively and suggestively with fairy folk, as we have seen, in *Sir Orfeo*. Elsewhere death assumes the figures of old women (the banshee of Gaelic folklore). Like Vice, War, and Pestilence, it has been a member of too many allegorical pantheons to document adequately here, and it is beyond the scope of this study to provide a full account of the development of personified Death up to the Middle Ages, a period where allegory was brought to a new pitch of comprehensiveness. It is important nonetheless in a discussion of medieval, European death to appreciate its ancient pedigree.

The macabre idiom not only provides a manner in which to represent the dead, as we have seen, but also one to formulate the allegory of Death. The macabre cadaver, in this context, both reinvigorates, accentuates and concretizes what can be as nebulous an abstraction as any other. Death was an entity which had always undergone embodiment, typically in the context of illuminating the Apocalypse of St John. However, as John Aberth points out, in French and English illuminated apocalypses of the late thirteenth century (just before the first appearance of the iconography of *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*) something new happens.[4] The Pale Rider Death — the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse — becomes, instead of a regal, bearded man, a skeletal figure. The first known example of this is manifested in the now fragmented 'Burchard-Wildt' Apocalypse of *c.* 1280, whose illuminator (possibly English or Lotharingian)

[3] John Lydgate, 'Death's Warning to the World', in *Minor Poems*, ed. by MacCracken, II, 655–57. See Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 338, for a description, and above, Chapter 4, for examples from MS Add. 37049.

[4] Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, pp. 183–96, provides an excellent discussion of this subject, from which my account of these illuminated apocalypses below is drawn.

was believed to have provided the same illustrations for a number of other illuminated apocalypses of the 1280s and 1290s.[5] The posture of skeletal death on horseback with a sword seen in these manuscripts enjoys significant longevity in the Middle Ages, and is observed in the magnificent life-size Angers Apocalypse Tapestry, dating from *c.* 1380, and woven for the chapel of Louis, Duke of Anjou.[6]

This macabre conception of Death does not remain confined to the setting of the Apocalypse in which it first appears. It is only a little later assumed by the corpses of *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* (which we have discussed in detail in the Introduction and Chapter 5, above), whose confirmed iconographic postures are attested by the beginning of the fourteenth century. Thus, conceived as more than a solitary figure riding out only at the end of time, the figure of Death, imitating that of Every (dead) man, is inserted into everyday life as the harbinger and consequence of everyone's individual death: universal death itself in the body of an individual. This posture is reiterated in the profligate multiplications of dead men/Death with the *Danse Macabre*, and the promulgation of the *ars moriendi*.[7] Thus, in some illustrated *ars moriendi* or other examples of deathbed iconography (Plate 10), a cadaverous (if domesticated) Death stalks every sickbed somewhat in the manner of a malnourished Santa Claus, a promised visitor to every bed. As we will see in Chapter 7, Death, still more intimately, takes everyone individually by the hand in the *Danse Macabre*.

Yet this individual 'deathbed' Death and the multiple Deaths of the *Danse Macabre* are complemented by a more terrifying, communal reception of the figure of death. This motif, *The Triumph of Death*, popular in Italy, where even in the fourteenth century, anticipating Petrarch's terza rima *Triumph of Death*, it is seen in the huge eschatological fresco in the Pisa Campo Santo, variously attributed to Giovanni Buffalmacco or Francesco Traini.[8] This is a panoramic programme of sin, death, and Christian redemption, in which death is lent wide programmatic variety. We see a virtuosic and mannered representation of *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* (see Plate 1), complemented by a winged figure with scythe — a giant female angel of death who swoops over the world. She is not represented as a cadaver, however. The macabre, decayed face of

[5] Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, p.187; but see Carey, *Apocalypse*, p. 82.

[6] Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, p.189; Carey, *Apocalypse*, p. 56.

[7] Koerner, 'The Mortification of the Image', p. 68.

[8] See Karl Siegfried Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 71–75.

the dead is instead reserved for the corpses in the mural's *Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*. As we will see, this pageant-like (literally triumph) of Death is dramatized, but also made *macabre* in the Middle English *Death and Liffe*, a seeming fifteenth-century analogue, if not direct imitation, of Petrarch's *Triumph*.

In northern Europe, the *Triumph* is the logical amplification of the *Danse Macabre* (but not in Cisalpine Europe, where *The Triumph* predates the *Danse*) where every living person is partnered by Death. Pieter Bruegel's depiction of *The Triumph of Death* (*c*. 1562) remains the most memorable and impressive of this period, a nightmarish vision where hordes of skeletons swarm a moribund city, offering a landscape of which no aspect is free of macabre horrors, such as cartloads of corpses driven by corpses, and armies of death overwhelming the living. Yet earlier artists too strove for this overwhelming incursion of death. A 'Triumph' exists in Jean Colombe's completion (1485) of the *Très riches heures* of the Duc de Berry, begun by the Limbourg brothers in 1413. Here, in the illustration for the second nocturne of the Office of the Dead, a Fourth Horseman, once more envisaged as a living, not a dead man, leads an army of macabre cadavers against the army of the living in an illustration of the words of Psalm 22, *Dominus regit me*: 'Though I walk in the midst of the shadow of death'.[9] The warband of rising dead, long known to medieval audiences in another form in the *Legenda aurea* (above, Chapter 2), are now every living man's foe. The personification of death must here stand in relief to its victims; where the dead are conceived as macabre figures, the allegory of death must take a different shape. Yet in a literary mode, allegory and didactic realism can be synthesized in the figure of death styling himself as a macabre *transi*, both as victim of and agent of death, as we will see in the N-Town Play's depiction of 'macabre' Death (below, Chapter 7). Ultimately, the cadaverous representation of Death is sublimated in baroque and romantic art as a clean, indeed sterile, skeleton, what John Manning describes as 'the hyperactive skeletons' of emblematic works and tomb sculpture.[10]

Yet Death in the Middle Ages had other avatars than the macabre: unicorn, knight, horseman (living, undecayed), old man, young woman, crone, even demon, or even still, angel, or a veritable menagerie of beasts and men, as one Middle English lyric-in-sermon, from the *Fasciculus morum*, denotes *mors* as:

[9] Jean Longnon and Millard Meiss, *Les Très riches heures du Duc de Berry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), Plate 82, p. 203 n. 82.

[10] John Manning, *The Emblem* (London: Reaktion, 2002), p. 289.

A lyon raunpaund wit his powe,
An ape making a mowe [*grin*];
A scriveyn writing on a screw;
An archer drawing in his bowe.[11]

Yet these zoological embodiments do not so much embody death as metaphorically signify its attributes. According to the *Fasciculus morum*, this is the heraldic shield of death, whose allegorical figure was conceived by the 'ancients' as a knight. His shield indicates his fourfold properties of death. The grinning ape is the mockery of the deceased's executors, the lion rampant is the ferocity of devouring death, the archer the sign of man's last drawn breath, and the scribe the sign of man's recorded sins.[12] The same text gives an acrostic schematization of the attributes of *Mors*:[13]

M —	*merowre*	of gostly schewing
O —	*orologe* ys deth	that wyl wake fro slepyng
R —	*robbowre*	of al erthely thing
S —	*somenour*	to the heye dom coming

Siegfried Wenzel observes that such rhetorical expansion of the name of death was popular,[14] and Grimestone's commonplace book offers a wholly vernacular acrostic in this regard also:

Deth is a Dredful Dettour;
Deth is an Elenge hErbergour [*distant harbour*];
Deth is a Trewe Tollere [*faithful exacter of tolls*];
And Deth is an Hardi Huntere.[15]

[11] Printed in Dougals Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval Religious Lyric* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 39.

[12] Siegfried Wenzel, 'Pestilence and Middle English Literature: Friar John Grimestone's Poems on Death', in *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague; Papers of the Eleventh Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, ed. by Daniel Williman, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 13 (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1982), pp. 131–59 (p. 139).

[13] Cambridge University Library, MS Dd 10. 15, fol. 23^{r}. Quoted in Gray, *Themes and Images*, p. 39. On the vernacular verses of the *Fasciculus*, see Siegfried Wenzel, *Verses in Sermons*: *'Fasciculus morum' and its Middle English Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1978).

[14] Wenzel, *Verses in Sermons*, p. 153.

[15] 'Deth is a Dredful Dettour', in *Descriptive Index*, ed. by Wilson, p. 23.

The allegorization of death as unicorn was in fact quite popular, something which we may attribute perhaps to the figure of the unicorn constituting a popular visual theme capable of sustaining multivalent allegorical readings. The exemplary figuration of the allegory, known as 'The Unicorn Apologue' or 'The Man in the Pit', is first witnessed in the legend of *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, a life of Buddha containing moral fables derived from Indian folklore, made popular in medieval Europe through various reworked Latin and vernacular versions. At times illustrated, such as in MS Add. 37049, fol. 19^{v} (see above, Chapter 4), and the late thirteenth-century Psalter and Hours of Yolande de Soissons (New York, Morgan Library and Museum, MS 729, fol. 354^{v}) this apologue (moral tale) appears (un-illustrated) as Tale XXX of the *Gesta Romanorum* also, where a man chased by the Unicorn (Death) climbs up a tree (earthly life). Because he is preoccupied with the honey/sin dripping from the top of the tree, he does not take heed of what lies below him, which is a pit (Hell), in which a dragon's mouth (Satan) is gaping open under him. He falls and is devoured.[16]

Despite this variety of depictions which eschew the macabre, no representation of death would be as immediately and verifiably recognizable in a visual context as a skeletal corpse. The macabre idiom of the Middle Ages and Renaissance makes Death and the dead themselves instantly and unambiguously recognizable. The confusion arises when both entities are required to be distinct from each other, a distinction they cannot have when portrayed as the same body. This confusion of the body and death was not new. In the Ovidian metaphor (*Metamorphoses*, XV. 234–37), *Mors* with his bite (*morsus*) was *edax rerum*, devourer of things. *Mors* could always mean both 'death' and 'corpse', and semantic games would endow whatever form Death took with both 'sting' and a 'bite'; but with the medieval macabre, we have a more audacious visual underlining of this coalescence of body and Death.

Macabre representations of personified Death in medieval art and literature can perhaps be thought of as a question of multiples. There is a mortal death for everyone — but only one — and the multiplicities of Death(s) represented in art are a function of whether death is received as an intimate, private deathbed encounter, or a sudden, collective response in the *Legend*, or even a mass encounter in the *Danse Macabre*. It is therefore convenient to examine the living

[16] My summary. Discussion of iconographic examples in Pitman and Scattergood, 'Some Illustrations of the Unicorn Apologue'. The Middle English version, *Barlam and Iosaphat*, is edited by J. C. Hirsh (EETS, o.s., 290 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)). See further on MS Add. 37049 and the Hours of Yolande de Soissons in Brantley, 'Images of the Vernacular', pp. 127–31.

encountering Death by numbers — in multiples of one in personal death, then finally everybody, in the Dance of Death (in Chapter 7, below).

Death Abed

At the end of the English prose redaction of *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode*, Guillaume de Deguileville's pilgrim ends his dreamed, allegorical life in seeing Death herself:

> Whan in the fermerye I was and hadde leyn there a while, sodeynliche and a soursaut I sigh an old oon that was clumben an hy upon my bed, whereof I was gretliche abasht. She afryght me so that speke to hire miht I nouht ne nothing aske of here. In hire hond she heeld a sithe, and she bar a cheste of tree, and anoon she hadde sett oon of hire feet upon my brest for to streyne me.[17]

Grammatical gender in the original French text, *la* mort, determines that death is female. Although Deguileville envisions her as an old woman and not evidently as a cadaver, a fourteenth-century French illuminator of the *Pèlerinage*, Pierre Remiet, depicts her as a macabre cadaver in female attire; this is the starting point (and indeed cover image) of Michael Camille's study of this illuminator of death in his groundbreaking *Master of Death*. In the English redaction, Death is imbued with speech, and signals her irritation as Grace Dieu stays her hand for a while: 'longe tarryinge anoyeth me — I wolde deliuere me anoon for I haue to go elleswhere'. Here, as before, Grace Dieu explains what the dreamer and the audience are witnessing: 'Lo here is the Deth that is comen.[...] [I]n hire coffin thi bodi she wole putte for to take it stinkinge to wormes [...]. [T]he flesh shal first be rotten and neere geten ayen at the general assemblee'.[18] It is Grace Dieu, not Death, who presents the reader with the image of the decayed corpse after Death has done her work, a future vision of the body of the pilgrim which has yet to give up the ghost.

Notable in Deguileville is the assertion of Death's female gender, which in Latin is grammatically female. Other learn-to-die texts emphasize Death's femininity also, such as Hoccleve's *Series*, Part IV (in a translation of Suso's *sciendi mori*). Iconographically, Death's grammatically female nature is easily circumscribed when a macabre representation is chosen and when gendered clothing is eschewed — most representations, typically those in illustrated die-well tracts, or

[17] Guillaume de Deguileville, *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of Manhode*, ed. by Henry Avril, EETS, o.s., 288, 292, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985–88), I, 173.

[18] Deguileville, *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of Manhode*, I, 173–74.

the Office of the Dead, are unmistakably male, even if, by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ingeniously feminized cadavers with distinct genitalia were deployed in the *Danse Macabre*, as at the mural in Bern.[19]

In Deguileville, Death is encountered as warning and meditative rehearsal of the act of dying. Both Deguileville's dream and the dreamer's life end finally as 'the Deth leet the sithe renne, and made the sowle departe from the bodi'.[20] It is at this point that the speaker wakes as his dreamed body 'dies'. Death, like infernal punishment for Tundale and other visionaries, is a process which can be experienced in preview by the living in the mode of the dream-vision (unlike the allegory of *Everyman*, whose action is addressed directly to the audience, not a first-person dream-narrator). Such a dreamed dry-run of dying is a gesture of great longevity in spiritual-health texts, rehearsed time and again in later popular allegories of the early sixteenth century such as Stephen Hawes's *Pastime of Pleasure*.[21]

Death and Verbal Portraiture: The Death's Head

If the bedside visit is one way of domesticating death, then the almost proverbial use of the human skull as death's head — a shorthand symbol for death, is a means for people to imaginatively stare death in the face. We have already observed (above, Chapter 1) the longevity and pliability of this symbol of death in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In charnel houses skulls were always arranged prominently among the piles of bones as the most distinctive of all the members of the skeleton.[22] Indeed, everyone in medieval society would have been likely

[19] Female gender is otherwise denoted in clothing and headdress. In Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 768, fol. 94^{r}, the Death of the *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* is not a macabre cadaver but an old woman. See Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 133.

[20] Deguileville, *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of Manhode*, I, 174.

[21] Stephen Hawes, *The Pastime of Pleasure*, ed. by William E. Mead, EETS, o.s., 173 (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), pp. 205–09. Woodcuts illustrate Death on a horse emerging from Hell, rushing at the dreamer, and cadavers exposed on a burial ground. These examples are from Worde's first edition of *The Pastime* from 1509. Worde initially used the 'Hellmouth' cut for his 1507 print of Caxton's *Boke called the Royal*, STC, no. 21430; a translation of Frère Laurent's 1280 *La Somme le roi*, a text which also gave rise to earlier English redactions such as the mid-fourteenth-century *Ayenbite of inwyt* of Dan Michel of Northgate, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, *Speculum vitae*, and also *Jacob's Well*.

[22] On English charnel houses see Vanessa Harding, 'Burial Choice and Burial Location in Later Medieval London', in *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100–1600*, ed. by Steven Bassett (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), pp. 128–29.

to see the human skull on a regular basis, given the high turnover of medieval cemeteries where old bones would have to have been disinterred frequently to make way for new. Such was their potential everyday familiarity that it seems little wonder that preachers may have tried to breathe new didactic horror into the skull as object, de-objectifying the skull and personalizing it as the future image of everyone's coiffured head.

Art imitates this proverbial didactic use of the skull, but permits the skull to speak for itself without sermonizing interpolation — as we will have observed, the sermon-trope of the address of dry bones is quite antique (see above, Chapter 1) and in late medieval English writing, skulls are, in a somewhat banal, literalizing fashion, allowed to speak for themselves in a lyric context in a poem by Henryson (below). Owst paraphrases John of Bromyard's sermon on death on how skulls should 'speak' to us of death in this regard:

> [The sermonist] will point his audience to the skulls and bones of the departed, bidding them to reflect how through the mouth once so delicate to kiss, so delicate in its eating and its drinking, through eyes but a short while before fair to see, worms now crawl in and out. The body or the head [...] now boasts no covering but the soil [...] no proud retinue save worms for the flesh, and if its life was evil, demons for the soul.[23]

The moral use of the skull in the still-life genre, serving as the ultimate example of an inanimate thing, became commonplace during the Renaissance. Its currency as a sign of mortality (and perhaps a certain general and cordial fatigue thereto obtaining) throughout the period (as only one of a potential plethora of allusions) is where Falstaff admonishes Doll Tearsheet not to speak to him 'like a death's head' in *II Henry IV*, and, and we have already observed (above, Chapter 1) how Hamlet famously ponders Yorick's skull in a rapture of musings on the lyrical *ubi sunt* theme. The skull as *vanitas* emblem is ubiquitous in Renaissance culture and persists well after the sixteenth century to enjoy a certain flourishing in the seventeenth in the context of a thematic void in reformed devotional art. Pre-Reformation, as already observed (above, Chapter 1), it constitutes part of the rubble of bones commonplace to the iconography of the Crucifixion, where Golgotha, itself meaning 'place of the skull', was traditionally the burial place of Adam.

Yet the skull was not confined to Golgotha; it could, *as memento mori*, frequently be inscribed within exemplary iconography which itself would have proposed instructive models for the reading of the skull. As an object, it accompanies

[23] Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, p. 344.

representations of Jerome in the wilderness or in his study, nestles comfortably amid hourglasses and flowers in moral still-life studies of the early baroque, and most memorably, is sprawled across the canvass of Holbein's *Ambassadors* of 1533 as a bizarre optical puzzle. This famous example of anamorphosis is rendered as

> a geometric distortion [...] which turns it into a pale grey oval smeared across the front plane of the painting, interfering with our view almost like a memory trace. Only when viewed from the side at the correct angle [...] does the skull take on its true identity and dominate the portrait [...]. As the skull absorbs our attention, the other elements in the painting, notably the record of particular human beings and their interests, is obscured.[24]

The ambassadors themselves would know this portrait captured a fleeting moment, and the anamorphic distortion when viewed from the correct angle ensures that it is life that is the illusory 'distortion' in the face of death.[25] Though anamorphosis was a popular trick in Renaissance portraiture, it was never used before as a means of representing the death's head. More conventionally conceived skulls were commonplace and would often be painted on the reverses of portraits in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as *memento mori*.[26] Some of these paintings may have also have been intended as epitaph portraits, to aid the prayers for the subject's soul after death.[27]

The moral still-life genre culminating in seventeenth-century northern art would also often feature a single skull as *vanitas* emblem. Still-life was in any case a commentary in its own right on fleeting life, the genre itself often termed simply as that of 'vanities', or *natura morta*.[28] In this regard the skull could be complemented by, or substituted with, a plethora of other signs of transitoriness: the watch, the hourglass, the mirror, precious tableware, burning candles, soap

[24] Jill Dunkerton and others, *Giotto to Dürer: Early Renaissance Painting in the National Gallery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 162.

[25] Dunkerton and others, *Giotto to Dürer*, p.162, which also shows the skull reproduced with the anamorphic distortion corrected. Full reproduction of *The Ambassadors* is given on page 156. 'The Ambassadors' were King Francis's legate to England, Jean de Dinteville and his younger friend, Georges de Selve. Dinteville, aged twenty-nine at the time, wears a barely discernible Death's Head on his cap. For fuller discussion, see Susan Foister, Ashok Roy, and Martin Wyld, *Making and Meaning: Holbein's Ambassadors* (London: National Gallery, 2001), pp. 44–57.

[26] The devotional image of the head of Christ crowned with thorns could also serve in this capacity. See Dunkerton and others, *Giotto to Dürer*, p. 103.

[27] Though this would be more true of German observance pre-Reformation. Dunkerton and others, *Giotto to Dürer*, p. 25.

[28] Philippe Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 193.

bubbles, food, fruit (at times worm-eaten), flowers, battered books, even musical instruments (which perform music which dies away). Very few objects indeed are wholly lacking in the potential to denote ephemerality, but it is notable that the symbols denotative of redemption and eternal life in this context (often ones demoted alongside the Dutch 'breakfast-banquet' studies of the early seventeenth century), such as wine, goblets, white tablecloths, and fish (which would have carried divine, particularly Eucharistic associations) are not to be found alongside the skull. The skull is simply the most unambiguous, jarring, and hence macabre metaphor of man's short life. It is in fact the representation of death itself, and its omission from the greater part of such still lifes must be seen as an artistic choice toward a desired subtlety and decorum of semiotic.

Where depicted, the skull is distinguished in the use of a standard set of embellishments. Teeth may be missing, very often the entire lower jaw. Perspective can be innovative, with the skull rolled onto its crown or side. The skull is often seemingly lacquered in appearance, or at least polished with years of handling; a visual allusiveness perhaps, to a trope over-manipulated in didactic rhetoric, approaching exhaustion with, as we have remarked above (Introduction), in the early seventeenth-century *Revenger's Tragedy* (by either Thomas Middleton or Cyril Tourneur), where Vindice, the revenger, rhapsodizes — in a rhetorical and dramaturgical echo of Hamlet upon Yorick — upon the skull of his poisoned mistress.

The figurative and moral manipulation (through the imagined physical manipulation and reading) of the skull, however familiar a trope, here remains one whose intentions are earnest, its potential imaginative exhaustions accessible only in individual performance and audience interpretation. The very same can be said of earlier, more explicitly exemplary models: poems with no ambitions to entertain (as does the *Tragedy*). Robert Henryson's late fifteenth-century lyric rendering of this *memento mori* of skulls, *The Thre Ded Pollis*, possibly modelled (as we have remarked above) on the gestures rehearsed in John of Bromyard's Sermon on Death in his *Summa predicantium*, begins without preamble, as we are warned by the skulls to be mindful of death by looking on them with affrighted sight.[29] We return here to the sermon address of dry bones which we observed in

[29] The date of this poem is uncertain, and Henryson's actual authorship is open to question — asserted only in the Maitland folio (Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepysian Library, MS 2553) but ascribed to Patrick Johnston in the Bannatyne manuscript (National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 1. 1. 6). The edition used here is Robert L. Kindricks's (*The Poems of Robert Henryson*, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997)), which is based on the Bannatyne manuscript.

Chapter 1. This is not death personified per se, but the relics of the dead whose mortality authorizes their homiletic discourse:

> O sinfull man, in to this mortall se [*sea*],
> Quhilk [*which*] is the vaill of murnyng and of cair,
> With gaistly sicht behold oure heidis thre,
> Oure holkit [*hollowed*] ene [*eyes*], oure peilit pollis bair [*skinless skulls bare*].
> As ye ar now, in to this warld we wair,
> Als fresche, als fair, als lusty to behald:
> Quhan [*when*] thow lukis on this suth examplair [*true example*]
> Off thy self, man, thow may be richt unbald [*you cannot be proud*].
>
> (ll. 1–8)

If we are content to discuss what is clearly an anthropomorphization of the dead themselves, and not Death, in this chapter, we need to consider a problem of subject matter. If it is beneficial to have Death address the living, what should it say? As we will again observe, too often Lazarus (as in the Wakefield Pageant) speaks not as one who has died, but as one who simply adopts the levelling discourse of death, and Death will speak as every (dead) man too, in the N-Town Herod (below, Chapter 7).

Henryson's skulls cannot surprise us. They systematically deploy the standard rhetorical battery of warnings ascribed to death and dying in sermon literature. Every man shall die, nothing can resist death, the hour and place of it is known to God alone — therefore have death in mind. To assist you, 'This sair exampill to se quotidiane | Sowld caus all men fra wicket vycis fle' (ll. 15–16) The sexless skulls by turn admonish 'lusty gallandis gay' (l. 19), and then 'ladeis quhyt, in claithis corruscant' (l. 25). The beauty of living youth and the desiccation of death are repeatedly aligned, a contrast reinforced in Henryson's repeated use of 'holkit' (hollowed) as an attribute of decay. Thus the living and the dead are opposed in the most graphic manner, based on the tallying of the attributes of their outward appearance, a rhetorical system familiar to medieval audiences. Here, familiar terms praising crystal eyes and whalebone-white skin, well-worn components of the standard rhetoric of physical praise in the medieval love lyric and courtly romance, are cruelly set in relief against a just-as-familiar standard of ineluctable post-mortem decay. 'Cristall ene' is a term paralleled in Henryson's own *Testament of Cresseid*, where a living *memento mori* is fashioned in a leprous Cresseid — a living Lazarus (if of the leprous, not cadaverous species). For the men:

Full laithly thus sall ly thy lusty heid,
Holkit and how, and wallowit as the weid;
Thy crampand hair and eik thy cristall ene
Full cairfully conclud sall dulefull deid;
Thy example heir be us it may be sene.
(ll. 20–24)

As for the women, who, even in life are gratifyingly bone-white of complexion:

With palpis quhyt and hals so elegant
Sirculit with gold and sapheris mony ane;
Your finyearis small, quhyt as quhailis bane,
Arrayit with ringis and mony rubeis reid:
As we ly thus, so sall ye ly ilk ane,
With peilit [*skinless*] pollis, and holkit thus your heid.
(ll. 27–32)

The three taunt the living audience. Time and again they propose themselves and their decay not merely as a general example, but as the objects of intrinsic study:

This questioun, quha can obsolve, lat see,
Quhat phisnamour or perfyt palmester —
(What master of physiognomy or palm-reader could [*determine*])
Quha was farest or fowlest of us thre,
Heir sowld be your study and repair,
And think as thus all your heidis mon be.
(ll. 41–43; 47–48)

Thus the familiar exemplum trope of equality and the *anonymity* of decay after death is re-emphasized. If the specifically triadic monstrance of skulls in Henryson attests to the influence of *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*, then the poet provides here a much simplified, reduced version of the *Legend* which has no need for articulated corpses to stagger out of dark woods to confront the onlooker. The supernatural element is thus comprehensively pared back, ensuring no distraction from the plain moral message. 'Reduction to skull' might describe the narrative strategy of the poem — nearly all physical description is confined to the skull and head, save for the women's breasts and fingers. These are targeted gender references, designed to provoke contemplation of the fate of feminine beauty after undergoing the effects of ageing and death. Here, then, are no blackened ribs, or viscera ripe with vermicular infestation. A skinless crown and hollow eyes only are the counterparts to curls, sparkling eyes, and white skin. In

the most intensely narrow field of introspection, our attention is not even drawn to the physical fate of the body below the neck. We are advised to confine our thought strictly to the skulls, and that our heads will resemble them one day. Nor are these skulls the vividly articulated actors of *The Three Dead*. Here the reader may merely *imagine* the skulls to be gifted with speech. As noted above, the description of their outward appearance is not extravagantly detailed; we are drawn merely to the sight of their skinlessness and hollowed eye sockets at each turn. Yet however economical in its description, it is here the sheer physical presence and abomination of the effects of time and death which constitute the necessary graphic admonition of life's brevity, a warning of an amplitude designed to exceed any sense of security in one's life. Once arrested by the sight, the reader is free to meditate on his or her own ending, prompted by this future mirror, and the here sexless face of Death which all would recognize. It is a recognition kindled for its audience not merely by its exemplification in text, but in countless iconographic examples which would continue to be figured until the seventeenth century.

The solitary skull upon which John Skelton's early sixteenth-century lyric speaker meditates in 'Upon a Dead Man's Head' is lent nothing of the fantasized chatterbox eloquence of Henryson's moralizing skulls, remaining instead a silent reminder of death which spurs the lyric speaker into morbid rapture.[30] Skelton intimates in his rubric to the poem that the head he now contemplates was sent to him as a token by a certain 'gentilwoman' as a gift to spur meditation. In producing an imaginatively monotone yet verbally virtuosic example based on this rhetorical gift of a dead man's head, Skelton's approach to this *memento mori* is somewhat different from that of Henryson's. Ostensibly beginning with a perspective confined only to the skull directly in front of him, he moves from the face and head of death to describing its entire macabre body. The skull itself is not described at all; referred to only as the 'ugly token' upon which he has devised this 'gostly medytacyon'.[31] The head, he says, has set him on a course of thought away from the worldly and reminded him of the certainty of death that awaits everyone (ll. 1–6). Seeing the head of the dead man is, in the macabre mode of visualization, to see the face of Death itself, and he begins to conceive for himself now the whole body of Death in the macabre idiom, implicitly taking his cue from the *Danse*

[30] On Bishop John Fisher, who was said to keep a human skull at both the pulpit and his dinner table, see Duffy, *The Stripping of Altars*, p. 303.

[31] The text is from John Rastell's 1527 print of Skelton's works, in John Skelton: *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 37–41.

Macabre and *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* in frescoes, illuminated books and mortuary art (ll. 11–18).

The speaker in Skelton's verse has 'seen' how this spearman Death hunts down his prey, citing a posture of death familiar to medieval audiences from medieval iconography, sermons, and the lyrics of death. He decorously surveys Death's physical attributes. In no particular order he casts brief, almost furtive glances over its body; flitting nervously between head, torso, and limbs, and back again. In insistent Skeltonics, he describes cadaverous Death:

> hollow-eyed,
> With synnews wyderyd,
> With bonys shyderyd,
> With hys worme-etyn maw
> And hys gastly jaw
> Gaspyng asyde,
> Nakyd of hyde,
> Neyther fles nor fell.
> (ll. 11–18)

No one can hide, he says, from this figure, and by the same token he conceals no detail from his audience: its shattered bones poke from beneath its desiccated flesh; its mandible hangs askew from the rest of the bare skull, free of flesh and hair. This figure of Death is a physical shambles, in a manner familiar from the macabre idiom: yet it is one he pronounces, that will quell us all (ll. 32–34). Casting his mind forward to the death throes of man, he perceives Death amid a familiar lyric (and Chaucerian) conceit, as a chess player who will surely checkmate us all (ll. 29–30). This ending for man will be assuredly wretched; in the briefest of allusions to the signs of death tradition, he describes how the very presence of Death will one day stop his own breath (l. 31). In death, our bodies will mirror the ghastliness of the body of Death — our own skulls grinning helplessly while our souls burn in Purgatory and our bodies lie rotting (ll. 35–36). It is at this point, having achieved a crescendo of macabre terror of man's helplessness in the face of Death, that the poet turns to delivering his consolatory coda. From meditation on the face of Death, we move towards the comfort of the face of Christ and the Holy Trinity (ll. 37–59). Death and Purgatory is inevitable, but the help of the 'goodly child | Of Mary mylde' is our sure defence from 'the dyne dale and [...]. the lake of fendys blake' (ll. 45–48). Thus, eschatological topographies are mapped from a fundamental blazon of the cadaver, a blazon that yields the active figure of death. Yet, it is one *macabre* face, implicitly, that will stimulate us the more to beseech Mary to grant us the redemptive vision of *her* face (l. 50).

Death in Dialogue

What we have observed above are symbols of death speaking with the voices of the dead inviting the same familiar meditative processes urged by medieval preachers in the *contemptus mundi* tradition. What bodies cannot (or should not) do — pursue, hunt, seize people — is properly performed only in a more firmly realized anthropomorphization of Death, where death comes alive. We have already seen Robert Henryson's interest in the themes of the macabre; how he allusively re-inscribes the pattern of *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* onto a simple sermon-theme of dry bones. Henryson's *Ressoning betuix Deth and Man* marks the poet still further as one aware of macabre tropes. Where Skelton eschews a directly vocal personification of his reminder of death (his Death never speaks), Henryson again vocalizes Death's warning out of its own mouth in the *Ressoning*. This is an encounter that is a true dialogue between Everyman and his ending, and is a summarization of the process of the *Danse Macabre*, which will be discussed fully in Chapter 7, below. In Lydgate's *Dance of Death*, each victim can only utter one stanza of lament before Death hurtles on to his next victim. In Henryson, there is instead room for a rudimentary psychological process of instruction, echoing that of the late fifteenth-century moral play *Everyman* in which Man learns to embrace the humility of the grave.[32] Death here shares the rhetoric used of his skull avatars, as above. He intercepts his Everyman partner in colloquy, advising, like the skulls, that 'mortall man' must make Death his mirror 'be baith day and nycht'.[33] This is a mirror, however, which is not to be predicated on any extensive programme of physical description.

Death is configured by Henryson in the attitude most common to the representation of Death in the context of illustrated manuscripts containing Middle English works (such as MSS Add. 37049, Selden Supra 53, and Douce 322), that of Spearman Death (see above, Chapter 4). This is the most concrete index of his appearance in the poem, the formulae of macabre decay in Skelton and *The Three Deid Pollis* now absent: 'Thocht thay be in thair roall stait and hicht, | May nocht ganestand quhen I pleiss schute this derte; [...] May nocht risist quhill it be at his herte' (ll. 5–6, 8). This is a destructive, energetic, predatory image — if a commonplace — but one effectively deployed, and apposite to Death's promise to strike at all.

[32] *Everyman*, in *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. by Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 280–97.

[33] Robert Henryson, *The Ressoning betuix Deth and Man*, in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. by Kindrick, pp. 173–75 (ll. 1, 2).

As we have noted, this formulation of Death as spearman seems not to explicitly confirm him as a figure constructed in the macabre idiom. Yet it is likely that the spearman of Death would automatically be interpreted as an articulated skeleton in spite of the lack of visual references within the poem, and despite this Everyman's irrecognition. Perhaps the moral theme of man's failure to recognize the approach of death is metaphorically reconfigured as Death's implicit adoption of the form of an ordinary figure, and not that of a macabre cadaver. In any event, the character of Man is at first nonplussed by this stranger, who implicitly seems to resemble a living man. Not recognizing Death, Everyman engages with him in belligerent rhetoric, directly mirrored by the image of the knight who fights Death to the last in Hans Holbein's sixteenth-century woodcuts of the *Danse Macabre:*

> Quhat freik [*figure*] on fold [*field*] sa bald dar maniss me,
> Or with me fecht, owthir on fute or horss?
> Is non so wicht or stark in this cuntré,
> Bot I sall gar him bow to me on fors.
>
> (ll. 13–16)

His opponent replies in turn, that his name is Death, and by the same token there is none who may resist *him*, echoing tauntingly the language of Man, who instantly retracts his boldness, lamenting his misspent youth and pride. Death admonishes him to maintain this remorse and adds his blood-curdling warning — the purpose of their encounter:

> Think on this wirdis I now upoun the cry:
> O wrechit man, O full of ignorance,
> All thi plesance thow sall deir aby;
> Dispone thy self and cum with me in hy,
> Edderis, askis, and wormis meit for to be;
> Cum quhen I call; thow may, me nocht denny,
> Thocht thow wer paip, empriour, and king al thre.
>
> (ll. 34–40)

It is with Death's warning that the traditional lyrical rhetoric of worms' meat is at last deployed. Death in this vision is constituted as a corpse only inferentially, but he will assuredly, by his own promise, render Man as such. What is now a humble *moriens* bows to the inevitability of death, renouncing the world in its anticipation, and casting his mind forward to his death struggle, imploring God and Christ to his aid against his only true enemy, who is emphatically not Death, but the devil:

Sen it is sua fra the I may not chaip [*escape*],
This wrechit warld for me heir I defy,
And to the, Deid, to luke undir thi caip,
I offer me with hairt, richt hummilly,
Beseikand God, the Divill, my ennemy,
No power haif my sawill till assay.
Jesus, on the with peteous voce I cry,
Mercy on me to haif on Domisday.
(ll. 41–48)

In *Ressoning*, a warning that could just as easily have been assigned in the lyric mode to the narrative voice of a corpse, or an indeterminate sermonizer, is delivered by Death himself. The appropriate internal, psychological response of the reader is vocalized by a dramatized figure of Everyman. With both *The Three Deid Pollis* and *Ressoning*, it is striking how Henryson at once fragments and consolidates the monitory gestures witnessed in *Three Dead* and *Danse Macabre*. Both texts can be considered truncations of their larger parent themes. The skulls speak explicitly of their appearance and of the appearance of the living with whom they are juxtaposed for their moral effect, just as their articulated counterparts in *The Three Dead* are conceived as tonics for vanity. Not conceived by Henryson as direct embodiments of Death, they speak, as do the three dead kings, with the voices of those who once lived, and present death specifically as a physical transformation, not a physical being.

Death's rhetoric in the *Ressoning* is far less sardonic than the often witty Lydgatian *Dance of Death* (as we will see in Chapter 7). In Henryson, Death's warning, delivered out of its own mouth, is of perhaps greater eschatological amplitude compared to that of the skulls. The physical nausea of Death's aftermath is hinted at, but what is more at issue is the prospect of Doomsday. Death is not to be feared in itself; it is merely the beginning of an ordeal which will last from Man's last breath, to the unnumbered ages spent dead and in Purgatory. The Last Things are expressly manifold in this instance, and Death is merely one of them before Judgement is attained — Spearman, yes — but a messenger who should not himself be shot.

We have thus seen how Death, symbolized in the bodies of the dead in the macabre idiom, is shaped as an object for visceral horror in Skelton, and seen also how it is fashioned in a mode less visually explicit, but nonetheless as an energetically articulated agent of last things — Death, Judgement, Hell, Purgatory. In the *Ressoning* we have had the individual impact of death reconfigured as a personal dialogue. It is the dramatization of Death and Last Things on a universal,

not individual scale which also lies at the core of the Middle English alliterative dream vision *Death and Liffe*. Any dispute with man and Death as above in Henryson's account can have only one outcome — Death's victory. Against it, as Death constantly points out in renderings of this kind, mortal man can make no defence. The Christian promise of eternal life, deferred and circumscribed both in Deguileville's deathbed scene and in Henryson, is eschatologically reconfigured as the ultimate defeat of Death by Life in *Death and Liffe*.[34]

Death and Liffe is the most ornate allegorical rendering of Death in Middle English. Generally agreed to date from the late fourteenth century, or the first decade or so of the fifteenth, the text has been recognized as part of a tradition of debate poems and eschatological and moral visions such as *Winner and Waster*, *The Parliament of the Three Ages*, and the panoramically vast *Piers Plowman*, as well as demonstrating an evident familiarity with Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae* — the text which did so much to popularize the female allegory of Nature, witnessed in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*.[35] As an allegorical debate (framed as a dream-vision), it presents the ultimate dichotomy — a debate by Death with that which opposes it. The poem indeed, goes further: in its nightmarish depiction of universal annihilation it suggests an affiliation with the iconography of the Triumph of Death, particularly resonant with the Pisan *Trionfo della morte* mural which we have mentioned above. Thus the English poem as presented here constitutes a moral drama of immense eschatological scope, a vision wholly different from the claustrophobic encounters of Man and Death we have examined above.

If resembling in many regards an extended elaboration on Passus XX of *Piers Plowman*, Death departs from Langland's sparingly described personification of Death — little other than an apostrophe — to providing a densely realized embodiment of the figure of Death replete with every conceivable grotesquerie, allied with macabre physiognomy. Expressly female, she makes an eloquent disputation before Lady Life, who then, by way of rebuttal, undoes her opponent in her narration of Death's cosmic defeat — her ancient combat with Christ and his harrying of her all the way to Hell. Thus a powerful eschatological vision in the

[34] *Death and Liffe*, in *Middle English Debate Poetry*, ed. by Conlee, pp. 139–65. The text is extant only in the Percy Folio (MS Add. 27879), and as a consequence, 'while we must accept that the Middle English has been modernised, the remaining corruption is not extensive (Susanna Fein, 'The Poetic Art of *Death and Life*', *YLS*, 2 (1988), 103–23 (p. 104)). Fein here argues for a northern fifteenth-century exemplar as constituting the copy which the Percy scribe may have used.

[35] *Death and Liffe*, p. 140.

romance mode of Death's defeat by Lady Life's chivalric champion Christ, the poem emerges as another manner of romancing the macabre, a quasi-romance in its sole manuscript, the Percy Folio, a seventeenth-century anthology of medieval romances, including the 'corrupt' version of *The Squire of Low Degree* (above, Chapter 1). An adventure in eschatology, *Death and Liffe* both pillories death and asserts its place in God's providence.

The action of the poem's allegory is quickly summarized. In scenes of exquisite visual pageantry, Lady Life's court, and every living thing within sight of the dream-narrator, is struck down as if by pestilence upon Dame Death's arrival (ll. 191–98), only to be resurrected and led off by Lady Life to immortality in Christ at the poem's conclusion. Life can now promise that Death no longer has the power 'on your comely corses to clap once her hands' now that they are the resurrected Christian dead (l. 434). As such, they are raised not in an act of macabre reanimation but rather (in a pointed contrast to the grotesque reanimation which personifies Death herself) in the spiritual and bodily transmogrification promised the blessed now 'fairer by 2 ffold thenn they before were' (l. 449). These scenes explicitly echo the apocalyptic raising of the dead at the Last Judgement, and the procession of the blessed into Paradise so often realized in medieval iconography, though here enthroned Christ in judgement must remain an unseen figure, represented by Lady Life in an almost Marian, intercessory vein.

The poem, as well as dealing with the ostensibly complex dramatization of eschatology, at once engages with the simple elemental mortal frustration at the ineluctable force of death, to which is promised the knowledge that *death*, not life, is fleeting. The unanswerable human 'why' at the subjection of all things to death is countered with the promise, not of an unending deathlessness, but of sublimation into eternal life — a more lurid rehearsal of the scheme of *Pearl*. Life indeed exists on earth, but her ultimate abode is proved to be Heaven. Death's only realms are this sublunary world and Hell. She has no place in Heaven; her sway is shown in every sense to be mortal, transitory, and, despite her being part of the natural order, almost diabolical — an alignment which is emphasized heavily throughout the two fits of *Death and Liffe*. Life herself provides Death's doctrinal genealogy: she is 'Dame daughter of the devil' (l. 235). Descending in fury from Satan's scripturally authorized north, unto the southern lands of Life, her verbal representation fuses demonic attributes with what clearly emerges as a desiccated female cadaver realized in the macabre idiom. As the very earth trembles at her arrival, the dream-narrator relates in horror every lineament of Death's physicality:

Once againe into the north mine eye then I cast.
I there saw a sight was sorrowfull to behold,
One of the vglyest ghosts that on the earth gone
[...]
& shee the ffloulest freke that formed was ever,
Both of hide & hew & heare alsoe.
(ll. 151–53, 157–58)

As with *The Three Dead*, a personification of death introduces here a taxonomic ambivalence; she is expressly introduced (initially) as a *ghost*. At issue here is not a misdiagnosis of her nature, but rather a lexical poverty not really addressed in any language, much less Middle English. Few adjectives can readily be adduced to the supernatural evocation of death. The term *ghost* is used here not in any way to denote Death as constituting merely a human spirit, but as conforming to a supernatural entity to be associated with death from the outset, before she is even named as death.

The poet expends great effort on the outward description of Death, to impress upon the audience her cadaver form conceived in the macabre idiom. Yet, in spite of the striking resonances Death's description bears here with the skeletalizing corpse, its actual embodiment resists exclusive classification according to one visual model. Unquestionably female in this reading, Dame Death is a complex and virtuosic accretion of the imaginative possibilities of Death's representation. Her figure incorporates elements of medieval grotesquerie common to iconographic renditions of demons and literary depictions of 'loathly' ladies, together with that of the corpse. Unmistakeably, she is clothed as a cadaver would be: fitted for a funeral, nude but for a seeming burial cloth. Colloquially, the narrator observes, 'She was naked as my nayle both aboue and belowe; | [...] lapped about in linen breeches' (ll. 159–60). She is 'long & leane & lodlye to see' (l. 162). This is a description which would match that of an ancient hag, a mode of representation common to female representations of death, as well as a long dead corpse; a more idiosyncratic fusion of contempt for women and *contemptus mundi* of a kind we have already observed. As a fully-fledged supernatural, almost semi-divine entity, she has the baleful, magical attributes of a Medusa: 'But a looke of that Ladye & his life passed' (l. 164). Here is no mere basilisk-glance however, but the very essence of death, conveyed (like love), as spears from the eyes to its victim. It is with her glowing red eyes that the demonic comes to the fore in her makeup. Just like those of Guinevere's mother in *Awntyrs*, they 'fareden as the fyer that in the furnace burnes' (l. 165). This red glow illuminates the skull-hollowness of her eye-sockets from which any human eyes have implicitly rotted away. Just like a

skull, 'full heauye brows' denote the exposure of her cranial ridge. Her cheeks are lean, though unexpectedly generous (perhaps feminine) lips yet remain 'full side' (ll. 166–67). It is here particularly that the poet conflates the realistic depiction of a long-decayed corpse with the grotesque anatomy of a monster possessed not only of 'a maruelous mouth full of long tushes' but, even more ludicrously, one having 'the nebb of her nose [hanging] to her navel' (ll. 168–69), mirroring the giant of Mont-Saint-Michel's 'grisly tuskes' and nose 'Hook-nebbed as a hawk' in the Middle English *Alliterative Morte Arthure* of the northern Thornton Manuscript.[36] The nose is highlighted here, as always perhaps, as the first port of call for the caricaturist. Nonetheless, like that of a corpse, or merely an ancient woman, the skin of Death's face retains a fetid pallor, 'like to the lead that latelye was beaten' (ll. 169–70), a favourite epithet to describe morbid pallor by alliterative poets, used in the death of Gawain in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (l. 3954).

These layers of attributes of monstrosity are easily recognized as typical elements of alliterative descriptive verse which has a tendency to fashion objects in hecatombs of synonyms and formulaic imagery. It may be supposed that the poet has no option but to make recourse to imagery ostensibly alien to that of a corpse to enable his alliterative scheme, though this is a hypothesis not easily demonstrated. The monstrous tincturing of the cadaver form of Death is best assessed as an aesthetic choice on the part of the poet; yet his imaginative eye ranges widely, and he augments his description to bring to bear on the form of Death every grotesquerie his craft can sustain. Though he has apparently set out to provide a fully realized cadaverous representation of Death, proper to a fifteenth-century milieu familiar with the macabre *transi*, the composer of *Death and Liffe* does more. Either he simply cannot resist fusing it with the ogre-like qualities of stock medieval monstrosity, or he has fully realized an ambition to lend to a description of Death an appearance fulfilling all modes of expectation, expectations which conform perhaps to more ancient visualizations of Death — as demon, and as crone. At a bare minimum, here, as elsewhere, any preordained expectations of the literary fulfilment of artistic tropes are baffled in the energetic alliterative mode. Death becomes, in his treatment, a figure as replete with zoomorphic horrors as the Frankenstein-like monster made of animals that is the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*'s Giant of Mont-Saint-Michel (ll. 1074–1103).

Mention should be made of the weapons of Death (appropriate in this romance vision of death). She is described throughout as bearing darts and

[36] *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. by L. D. Benson (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), pp. 113–238 (ll. 1075, 1082); hereafter cited in the text by line number.

swords. We have seen how Death is accompanied by a dart and spear in Henryson's *Ressoning* and how the heraldry of ape, scribe, lion, and archer denote the attributes of death in the *Fasciculus morum* (above). Just as Christ (in another lyric iteration) 'cam to fight | withouten shield or spere', Death is marked here with the almost extraneous weapons of death.[37] Life recalls how Death killed Christ in seemingly unselfconsciously appropriating Longinus' Lance (l. 381). Accoutred as a knight for the joust with Christ (the scriptural, and paramount battle of Life and Death lent liturgical longevity in the Easter antiphon *Mors et vita*), she retains the emblem of a sword, which she plants in the ground in warrior-fashion as the parley with Life commences — theirs is to be a battle of often astringently sarcastic words (ll. 226–28, 278–81).[38] In *Death and Liffe*, Death takes weapons then with almost a gesture of irony — as she engages Life's army, she 'reacheth forth darts', employing the traditional weapons of Death and the very authentic mainstay of English armies, so that with due irony she slays by dint of arms those that live by arms (l. 200). Here, too the poet gives free rein to alliterative battle-imagery as Death is seen to 'dang out the braynes' of 'dukes that were doughty' (l. 204).Yet these weapons merely complement and illustrate her destructiveness — being Death, she can destroy all that lives by a mere look or a touch. As we have seen above, death emanates from Death's own furnace-like eyes, a cruel re-deployment of the weaponry of Love which in the *Roman de la rose* are shot from the eyes of the Lover, wounding with a glance.

Yet, denoting not mere war but almost a natural holocaust, she does not stop with armies but hurtles on, as the Death of the *Danse Macabre* does, through all estates to lay low 'Merry maydens on the mold' and 'Younge children in their cradle' (ll. 205–07). The very touch of her bare feet on the ground is baleful enough to scour the earth of grass and fell the trees of the forest (ll. 193–94), mimicking the self-described *modus operandi* of Death in the N-Town play of Herod:

> I am sent by God; Deth is my name.
> Allthynge that is on grow I welde at my wylle:
> Both man, and beste, and byrdys wylde and tame,
> Whan that I come them to, with deth I do them kylle.
> Erbe, gres, and tres stronge, take hem all in-same;
> Ya the grete myghty okys with my dent I spylle.

[37] *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. Duncan, p. 100.

[38] Fein, 'The Poetic Art of *Death and Life*', p. 119.

> What man I wrastle with, he xal right sone haue shame —
> I geve hym such a trespatt he xal evrymore ly style.
> For Deth kan no sport.
>
> (ll. 181–89)

It is this all-embracing and untrammelled access of death (suggestive of epidemic), arriving as it does in the high noon of the dreamer's allegorical day (and not as would seem symbolically proper, the evening), that causes Lady Life to protest to God for surcease (ll. 140, 210–24).[39] Though noon is indeed the prime of life in this reading, it is also the time traditionally most marked for supernatural and fairy incursion into the world in romance (as in *Sir Orfeo* and *The Awntyrs off Arthure*). Life's court indeed, composed of allegorical attendants plainly derived from the *Romance of the Rose*, is primed for interruption in the romance mode. Otherworldly interruptions conventionally manifest themselves in the *undrentide* — the liminal divisions of the day of midmorning, midday, and midafternoon. The afternoon (three o'clock), reminiscent of the time of Christ's expiration also, serves as the high water mark of the access of universal earthly mortality. From hereon mortal death is subsumed in perpetual life.

Thus the universal access of death penetrates even into the romance mode from the didactic. Just as the macabre idiom concretizes the visual references that convey the horror of death and the fear of the dead in *The Three Dead* and *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (above, Chapter 5), so too does the alliterative mode engage with the visual language of the macabre to promote death as the ultimate supernatural Other in *Death and Liffe*. Death is re-deployed not only from a personal to a universal perspective, but from traditional morbidity to a lurid supernaturalism clothed in the language of the macabre. In the text's narrative sweep dictated by allegory and romance, we have more naturalistic, apocalyptic affiliations than the stylized, frieze-like deployment of multiple deaths and multiple victims in the Dance of Death (to be discussed in chapter seven, below). Yet both *Death and Liffe* (featuring its temporary triumph) and the *Danse Macabre* are concerned to represent the same theme — all estates are met by death; the reader is ultimately met by a macabre face of personified Death which mirrors and concretizes his own future face in both texts. Whether, as in our range of readings in this chapter, the perspective of the audience is confined to head or body, or the didactic perspective is confined to individual or universal mortality, Death is demonstrated as an active and vocal imaginative entity capable of sustaining a

[39] *Death and Liffe*, p. 152.

traditional range of morbid rhetoric, together with an outwardly visual frame predicated by the macabre idiom. This face — the final formulation of death, as both man and allegory of death — is, in the *Danse Macabre* (the final avenue for the promulgation of the macabre), the subject of our last chapter.

They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;
It had been strange, even in a dream,
To have seen those dead men rise.

—Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Alle be not mery/ wich that men se daunce.

—Lydgate, *The Dance of Death*

Man remembwr of the dawnce of makabre.

—BL, MS Additional 37049, fol. 31^{v}.

Chapter 7

Dancing with Death: The *Danse Macabre*

The *Dance Macabre* — the motif which provides (if retrospectively) the taxonomy for the reception of the foetid corpse in medieval art and literature, and which sums up the late medieval appetite for the realistic objectification of Death and the dead — is defined by James Clark, as

> a literary or artistic representation of a procession or a dance, in which both the living and the dead take part. The dead may be portrayed by a number of figures, or by a single individual personifying Death. The living members are arranged in some kind of order of precedence, such as pope, cardinal [...]. The dance invariably expresses some allegorical, moral or satirical idea.[1]

In the *Dance* as translated into English by John Lydgate in 1424, each member of the living of each estate of society — temporal and spiritual — from emperor and pope, to labourer and hermit, is issued with a stanza of summons by Death (or a dead person), and the summoned individual responds with a stanza of lament.[2] As we have discussed already (above, Introduction), Lydgate's French source for the text accompanied the pictorial Dance's first recorded witness: the *Danse Macabre* depicted on the charnel house in the Church of Holy Innocents in Paris in 1424. Earlier renderings are possible, though now unknown, and opinions as to what may have constituted the earliest actual depictions of the Dance vary.[3] We have seen (above, Introduction), that the term *macabre* was, to judge from Jean

[1] Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages*, p. 1.

[2] *English Verse*, ed. by Hammond, p. 124.

[3] See the discussion in Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages*; Mâle, *Religious Art in France*; Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 29.

Le Fèvre's cryptic allusion 'je fis de Macabre la danse', already in use by 1376 to describe some form of a death dance, though to what exactly it referred to must remain unclear — the Dance does not verifiably become popular in the form we now recognize until the following century. Crucially, as we have observed already, the *Danse Macabre* is the linguistic source of the term *macabre*. The etymological untraceability of the proper noun used seemingly in adjectival connexion with the Dance mirrors the Dance's obscure cultural genesis. This origin might be postulated to be a fusion, amid a context of end-of-days sermonizing characteristic of the mendicant preachers, of the superstitious fear of the dead themselves, allied with a 'mysterious' dance motif impossible to account for adequately.[4] Other influences might include diffuse folklore and literary motifs seen in legends such as the Dancers of Kolbek (see below), or perhaps a general cultural background of hectic traditional dances where partners would be swiftly seized, combined too with traditional ideas of the otherworldly dance partners of fairy-rounds, culturally synonymous with death. Indeed, echoes of medieval fairy lore offer a tempting analogue often suggested in connection with evoking an original Dance of the Dead. The twelfth-century writer Walter Map recounts (as we have observed above, Chapter 1) in his *De nugis curialium* (IV. 8) how a man buried his dead wife only to find her subsequently in a forest, dancing in a circle. Snatching her back from this otherworldly round dance in an unpremeditated Orphic manner, he and his wife raise a family whose descendants are called children of the dead woman.

Taking the example above as a folkloric model, it might be argued that popular imagination was inclined to conceive the dead, in a symbolic mode, as liable to return to seize the living in a cyclical, interminable dance; a far cry from any notional fairy folk, but indicative of untraceable cultural syntheses tantalizingly hinted at in *Sir Orfeo* (see above, Chapter 3). The Dance may thus envision a dramatic, quasi-apocalyptic mass incursion of rapacious dead people, one artistically formalized and stylized for audiences of the later Middle Ages in the mode of a dance.

There is, in fact ample evidence recording dances of death staged as moral pageants in the mid- to late fifteenth century — though not, it should be emphasized, from the earlier part of the century or even the fourteenth. What ultimately became texts of the Dance may first have originated as speech for actors or as a commentary for a sermonist and only subsequently might they have been

[4] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 159. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, also refers to a 'primitive' dance of the dead (p. 131).

rendered as accompaniment for a graphic representation of a Dance of Death.[5] Indeed, the direct source for the three earliest *Danse Macabre* poems, in Paris, Lübeck, and in Spain, may have been a moral play, masque, or pageant predominantly in dance form, though documentary records for any such performance post-date the initiating Innocents mural.[6] However first manifested, the Dance proper, as pictured at Innocents and elsewhere in Europe is to be re-emphasized as constituting firstly not a Dance of Death personified, but as a dance of *the dead*; a *danse des morts*, not *mort*.[7] It is only in the English translation, though based on the French *Danse*, that the Dance becomes unambiguously a Dance of Death 'himself' — a dance where Death returns repeatedly to lead away a new victim. The French *Danse* was, by contrast, comprised of the victim and *le mort* — 'the corpse' — and only in the *Danse Macabre des femmes* did '*la* mort' — 'the dead woman' — or (perhaps) Death (her)self, appear.[8] It is, of course, difficult to pin down the exact taxonomy and gender signification of Death in the French language: despite its grammatical gender, it is not always (or even often) envisioned as a female entity.[9] Nonetheless, Lydgate translates *le mort* as 'Death', and not as 'the dead man', or 'body' — in what surely indicates a preference for a more poetic realization of the French term than a direct (mis)translation.

Yet the evocative nature of the Dance obviates any such hair-splitting over semantic interpretation. Veronica Sekules, a historian of medieval art, agreeably evokes the artistic effect of the Dance as an imaginative movement of life into death where 'all classes [...] sway together in harmony as the dead reach back in life to snatch them'.[10] This reading emphasizes the Dance as stylized re-evocation of an unarticulated fear of the dead in popular superstition, and underlines the Dance as a multivalent dance of both the dead *and* the living, not simply Death and his victims. Nonetheless, the Dance must eschew any one absolute reading

[5] *English Verse*, ed. by Hammond, pp. 127–28.

[6] Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages*, pp. 91–92.

[7] This point is made by Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 131. Later fifteenth- and sixteenth-century French adaptations of the *Danse Macabré*, entitled *Danse de la mort*, existed also (*Danse Macabré of Women: MS fr. 995 of the Bibliothèque nationale*, ed. and trans. by Anne Tukey Harrison (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1994), p. 50).

[8] On the sex of Death in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see Guthke, *The Gender of Death*.

[9] Guthke notes that 'French linguistic sensibilities' by the same token do not prevent the depiction, of *la mort* by satirists (in one more recent instance) as a male waiter presenting the bill to Hitler (*The Gender of Death*, p. 2).

[10] Veronica Sekules, *Medieval Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of its nature, even if its moral is very clear indeed. Eleanor Hammond, in editing the Lydgatian translation, rejects any interpretation of the Dance as one comprised of dead people, and not Death. This, she maintains, is a viewpoint predicated 'upon a reading of modern ideas into medieval artistic conditions. The repetition of the skeleton puzzled no medieval understanding'. In her reading, the unlimited multiplications of personified death for every estate does not denote the presence of generations of dead people, but is a consequence merely of the arcade-division of the cloister walls on which the dance at Innocents would have been painted.[11] This hypothesis assumes of course that the Innocents' *Danse Macabre* had no further cultural precursors, painted or otherwise performed. Johan Huizinga, followed by Woodburn Ross (and later Michael Camille), maintains the Dance's exclusive interpretation as dance of dead folk based on a reading of French stanzas where the interlocutors are the dead man, or woman.[12] In fact it is perfectly consistent to regard the Dance as a place where each 'meets his own personal *mort* as a skeleton, in a series of thirty potential self-portraits'.[13] Yet these distinctions may be purely academic. As we have already seen, Edward IV in his will would describe his own planned *transi* on his tomb as the image of death, even though this figure, would, in effect, be Edward himself, dead (see above, Introduction). Similarly, as Hammond indicates, a medieval audience would not have worried overmuch at the interpretation of the dancing cadaver as dead man or Death. It was a multivalent symbol comfortably suggestive of both, irrespective of language or semantics. As medieval preachers pointed out time and again, the dead man was always the image of Death.

Thus, in the *Danse Macabre*, every living being is stalked by a hideous entity who may indeed be another dead peer of his estate, returned to the world of the living, waiting to abduct him to join the dead in the world below. This entity may still be Death itself, multiply personified (for whatever practical purpose), in the emblematic guise of a cadaver. The figure may yet be (somewhat abstrusely) precisely the living person himself abstractly dug from his future grave somewhat in the posture of a doppelgänger. In the final analysis, as we have already discussed, the cadaver of the medieval macabre could be all three things at once. The Dance constitutes an emblem evocative of ancient apprehensions of the dead, and recombines them with an avant-garde depiction of Death itself as a dead person.

[11] *English Verse*, ed. by Hammond, p. 128.

[12] Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 131; *Sermons*, ed. by Ross, p. 276.

[13] Camille, *Master of Death*, p. 158.

Consequently the Dance, according to Veronica Sekules, may be 'described as a macabre and strange fantasy, yet is entirely consistent with the medieval acknowledgement of death and life as a continuum'. Such imagery, as found in the *Danse*, the *Legend*, and funerary art 'enabled the dead to reach back suggestively into life' while concomitantly exploring the importance of death amid the artistic fascination with the protracted process of the removal of life from the body.[14]

The broad continuity and appeal of this theme is still abundantly evident in the Mexican celebrations of the Day of the Dead: All Souls' Day. Amid ostentatious displays of often comically stylized skeletons — *calaveras* — families commemorate their deceased, whose spirits are believed to return to their homes, by offering them the food and drink they were accustomed to in life. In contrast with other commemorations of the dead which accentuate their partition from the living, this feast marks their return to the world to partake of their former pleasures. The overall effect with this cultural iteration of the Dance, as with its medieval forebears, is a complex and subjective mix of recognition, burlesque, and discomfort. The Dance, though providing the original association of the term *macabre* which would later encompass notions of morbid horror, constitutes to some degree the abbreviation and exemplification of the medieval tropes, at times morbid, of Christian watchfulness in the face of death. It is, as we have said, not the first iteration of macabre pictorial art, but it remains in its own right the most recognizable one; a visual metaphor for death whose popularity (misleadingly) stamps the fifteenth century with its distinctive impression. Life here, *was* the Dance of Death, a dance which could attain varying pitches of apocalyptic intensity until it approached that of the Triumph of Death. The 1493 Nuremberg Chronicle, for instance, spoke of its age as the sixth and final one before the universal Dance of Death and second coming.[15] The *Danse Macabre*, in which every living mortal is doubled by his or her own death, embodied life in the shadow of death: a duality found in the alliterative *Death and Liffe* (see above, Chapter 6) and one concretized in medieval double *transi* tombs (see above, Chapters 1 and 4) which represented, in the macabre idiom, their decaying contents as matters for viewing and remembrance, to complement the living visage of the deceased.

The theory that the *Danse* may actually derive from the older *Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead* is not universally accepted. That they are distinct

[14] Sekules, *Medieval Art*, pp. 105–06.

[15] Carey, *The Apocalypse*, p. 99.

tropes is pugnaciously advanced in Clark's 1950 study, where they are read as owing each other nothing more than the status of a 'parallel'.[16] Sekules's more recent analysis for the New Oxford History of Art posits the Dance as the *Legend*'s 'late fifteenth-century variant'.[17] Frances Warren, in editing the English texts, acknowledges the contribution of the *Legend* and offers a three-pronged theory of origination for the Dance. The first is satiric — the dance, as we have seen, is in part an assertion of social levelling in death. The Dance's thematic precursor in this regard is the poem derived from an early thirteenth-century Latin original, the *vado mori*, where a small number of figures, representative of different estates, proceed to their death with the phrase as their exiting refrain.[18] We have already observed this theme in MS Add. 37049 and in Henryson's *Ressoning* (see above, Chapters 4 and 6). The second originating prong is *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*, where, ameliorated by a clement warning, mortal death, in its macabre guise, is postponed for the living. Thirdly, there is the idea of dancing itself, a rather more diffuse cultural component.

It has been outlined above that this dancing motif could either have stemmed from an *ur*-Dance of Death wholly from popular custom and now unrecorded, or that the motif represents a dramatization of the *vado mori* trope in the context of a sermon.[19] That, however, the dance action of the *Danse Macabre* is the product (or by-product) too of a clerical warning against actual dancing in graveyards has also been entertained by historians of the Dance. Medieval graveyards, as among the few public open spaces in built-up communities, were notoriously liable to be the setting for social activity wholly unrelated to the burial of the dead. The mural painting of the Dance of Death becomes in this context something of a scarecrow against an impious public liable to flock to this particular open space. Medieval graveyards were not typically overladen by gravestones and hence would not be inherently hazardous places to dance in, were people not otherwise morbidly disinclined.[20] In this reading, paradoxically, the *Danse* becomes a motif

[16] Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages*, p. 95.

[17] Sekules, *Medieval Art*, p. 106.

[18] Three English vernacular versions, from BL, MS Add. 37049, MS Cotton Faustina B. vi. II, and MS Stowe 39, are printed in *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Brown, pp. 248–50. See Chapter 4, above.

[19] A distinct *ronde des morts* may have existed prior to the genesis of the *Danse Macabre* according to an allusion from before 1350 in a Dutch version of *Maugis d'Aigremont* (Warren, *The Dance of Death*, p. xv).

[20] Pearsall, 'Signs of Life', p. 60.

reflective of the need to *encourage* fear of the dead, not one stemming from an already-present supernatural dread. The *Danse Macabre*, were it to be painted in this context and this location (more in Continental than insular Europe), becomes a reminder that the living enjoy themselves impiously in the presence of the unseen dead, rather like children being warned against waking bedridden elderly relatives. Were the living to 'dance' in these places therefore, it would be to dance not only with the living, but also with the dead.

The famous tale of the Dancers of Kolbek — witnessed in the early fourteenth-century English tale collection *Handlyng Synne* of Robert Manning — wherein a band of dancers is cursed by a priest to dance for a whole year without rest in the graveyard they refuse to leave, is a related injunction. Though in no way depicting a dance of the living and the dead, macabre resonances are to be found in the tale's grotesque miraculous episodes. The very daughter of the priest, whom the amorous male members of the dancing band had brought out, is also caught up in the supernatural dance, whose members are preternaturally preserved from exhaustion and starvation. When her brother tries to remove the girl from the ring he succeeds only in tearing off her arm while she carries on singing and dancing frenetically, shedding not a drop of blood, while the arm remains 'as drye, with al the haunche, | As of a stok [*tree trunk*] were rive a braunche'.[21] The distraught priest buries the arm only to find it cast out of the ground (on three separate occasions). Just as unholy bodies are regurgitated by consecrated ground in exempla, so too are the mere members of those under interdiction (see above, Chapter 2, for other examples of the effects of anathema on the dead). The priest makes the best of a bad lot and keeps his daughter's limb in the church as an additional warning (ll. 107–21). The following Christmas, a year to the day since the curse, the dancers abruptly separate, file into the church, and sleep like the dead for three days (ll. 160–66). Upon waking, the dancers inform the priest that his own life's days are near an end (ll. 177–79). Sure enough, he dies of grief when he finds that all have awoken except his daughter, Eve, dead from the trauma of her missing limb (ll. 180–81).

Blending with this association of the dance with ideas of the diabolical are legends of 'choreomania' during the Black Death. A fantastical, swindling sect of *chorisants* were reputed to have appeared in the Rhine/Flanders region during the 1373 outbreak of the plague. Their practice was to dance to simulated exhaustion,

[21] *Robert of Brunne's Handlyng Synne*, ed. by F. J. Furnivall, EETS, o.s., 119, 123, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul Trench, Trübner, 1901–03), ll. 92–93; subsequent citations of *Handlyng Synne* refer to this edition and are cited in the text by line number.

and allow themselves to be trampled in mimicry of death. Warren tentatively suggests, as do others, that some craze for dancing, advanced by the plague, had a bearing on the popular projection of the *Danse*.[22] Her conclusive prescription, and the most probable, is that the Dance represents a distinct offshoot of a morbid theological imagination, and of the widespread mendicant propagation of the language of *contemptus mundi*.

Lydgate's 'Daunce of Deeth'

In its fifteen surviving manuscripts there are two redactions (A and B) of Lydgate's Middle English translation of the *Dance*, differentiated according to the ordering of the characters. Versions disagree on the title for the piece, which when not called the *Daunce of Macabre/Machabre*, is prefaced alternatively as the *Daunce of Poules/Powlys* (Bodley MS 686, Corpus Christi College, MS 237), *Incipit Macrobius* (in MS Lansdowne 699 and Lincoln Cathedral, MS C. 5. 4.), and *Macrobius, or Power of Death over us all* (in Leiden, Cod. 9).[23] The seeming substitution here of an unfamiliar neologistic proper noun (macabre) with a more familiar name (the author of the commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*) is telling. The earlier, longer version of the *Dance* (A), which is closer to the French version printed by Marchand in 1485, has Lydgate's five-stanza prologue stating his source and intention and a two-stanza envoy stating his conventional apology for his rude efforts. B lacks both prologue and envoy, and substitutes different characters in six cases. It is nonetheless firmly a reworking of Lydgate's first version, rather than a translation from a different source.[24] Lydgate's is the only full version in English (see above, Introduction), which he says he made at the urging of 'frensshe clerkis taking aqueintaunce [...]. And fro Paris to Engelonde it sente' (ll. 22, 667), most likely for the Dance painted at St Paul's Cathedral in London. Though it is not possible to assign an exact date to his translation, which must post-date 1424, in all likelihood it originates with Lydgate's stay in Paris in 1426

[22] Warren, *The Danse of Death*, p. xv.

[23] The manuscripts of Lydgate's *Dance* are San Marino, Huntington Library, MS Ellesmere, E1 26. A. 13; BL, MS Harley 116; Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R. 3. 21; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud 735, MS Bodley 221, MS Selden Supra 53 (group A). Oxford, Corpus Christi, MS 237; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 686; BL, MS Lansdowne 699; Leiden University Library, Codicem 9, Catalogi Voss. Gg 4; Lincoln Cathedral, MS C. 5. 4; BL, MS Cotton Vespasian A 25 (group B).

[24] *English Verse*, ed. by Hammond, p. 124.

with the Earl of Warwick.[25] The B version may well have been Lydgate's own revision, undertaken at the request of John Carpenter, to accompany the Dance mural at St Paul's in 1430.[26] Surviving until 1549, when it was destroyed by the Duke of Somerset, the *Dance of Poules* must have become very well known, and is commended, only shortly before its destruction, by Thomas More, in his treatise on Last Things, as a most useful device if accompanied by sincere inward reflection on the significance and inveitabilty of death. Clearly, images and stories of death and the macabre are useless unless internalized with earnestness:

> But if we not onely here this word death, but also let sink into our our heartes, the very fantasye and depe imaginacion therof, we shall parceiue therby, that we wer neuer so gretly moued by the beholding of the daunce of deth pictured in Poules, as we shal fele ourself stered and altered, by the feeling of that imaginacion in our hertes. And no marvell. For these pictures expresse only the lithely figure of our dead bony bodies, biten away the flesh. Which though it be ougly to behold, yet neither the sight therof, nor the sight of al the dead heads in the charnel house, nor the apparicion of a very ghost, is half so grisely as the depe conceiued fantasy of deathe in his nature, by the lively imaginacion grauen in thein owne heart.[27]

Only one fragment of a complete Dance of Death now survives in Britain (behind panelling on the North Wall of the Guild Chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, programmatically linked with illustrated 'Erthe upon erthe' verses), in contrast with the widespread depictions still extant of *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead* (clustered in East Anglia and the south of England).[28] Nonetheless Lydgate's literary Dance outlived its iconographic counterpart altogether in Britain. But the extent to which other poetry is modelled on Lydgate's *Dance* or merely commonplace analogues is open to question; we have seen what appears to be a truncated adaptation of the theme of the Dance in Henryson's *Ressoning betuix Deth and Man* (though this example may just as easily be argued to be a version of the common *vado mori* theme which preempts the literary dance). Other Middle English texts make specific allusion to the *Danse Macabre*, including a twelve-stanza poem in MS Add. 37049 that urges its

[25] *English Verse*, ed. by Hammond, p. 126.

[26] Pearsall, 'Signs of Life', p. 62.

[27] 'The Remembraunce of Death', in *Last Things: Death and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000); *The Complete Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. by A. S. G. Edwards and others, 21 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963–97), I, 139.

[28] I am grateful to Sophie Oosterwijk for bringing the Stratford mural to my attention.

audience in the tenth stanza to remember the 'Dawnce of Makabre' (see above, Introduction, and Chapter 4).

Lydgate prefaces his work with a *verba translatoris*, which leads by way of an enumeration of the traits of Death to the source of his work, one he recommends us all to commit to mind (*memorial*):

> Considerith this/ ye folks that be wys
> And it enprentith/ in youre memorial
> Like thensaumple/ wiche that at Parys
> I fonde depicte/ oones in a wal
> Fful notably/ as I reherce shal
> Ther of frensshe clerkis/ taking acqueintaunce
> I toke on me/ to translatyn al
> Oute of the frensshe/ machabres daunce.
>
> (ll. 17–24)

Thus each may see 'As in a mirrour [...]. | Her ougly fine [...] cleerly ther behold' (ll. 31–32). A *verba auctoris* (of the presumed doctor Macabre) leads to the Dance proper, begun by 'Deeth' (never a dead man) accosting the pope as head of all estates. Estates temporal and spiritual are interwoven as Death proceeds in descending order from pope and emperor to hermit and finally, displaying Death's handiwork, the dead king, 'ligging dede and eten of wormes' (colophon, stanza 80).

The text of the Dance is straightforwardly aligned with the medieval convention of estates satire, and, as Derek Pearsall agreeably remarks, it becomes a kind of 'General Epilogue' to be contrasted with Chaucer's General Prologue from his *Canterbury Tales*.[29] Death engages each of his partners with tart sarcasm, rising at times to genuine gallows humour. Each victim too ruefully acknowledges the unexpectedness and irresistibility of Death, and the futility and vanity of living according to his estate, and frequently of his misuse of office. The limited set of rhetorical motifs in Death's summons and the reply of the living are varied and reiterated throughout all thirty or so personages. Here,

> For once, what Lydgate had to do coincided with what he could best do. There is no need for any development of ideas, no narrative, no exposition, only variation, repetition, insistence on the call of death and man's reply — a prolonged and unvarying antiphon.[30]

[29] Pearsall, 'Signs of Life', p. 64.

[30] Pearsall, 'Signs of Life', p. 63.

Each stanza, those spoken by Death and the living, ends with a proverbial or aphoristic tag which in most cases amounts to little more than an exhortation to die well. At each of his stanzas which mark the description of his victim, Death uses the verb *to dance*. Even though he frequently refers to himself in the third person as Death, and though each stanza is an invitation from Death to die (a notable exception is in the address of the Poor Man to the Usurer), aside from the concluding tags of his stanzas, the verb *to die* is itself seldom employed by death himself. All rather must join what he describes as his dance. Time and again beauty, opulence in dress, hoarded wealth, temporal and spiritual power are the trappings to be cast off in joining the dance, as if disrobing in anticipation of a sweaty jig; and each figure is mocked amid the description necessary for the reader to distinguish one figure from another — a description that invariably focuses on the costume which lends the person distinction in its estate. Thus Death mocks the Cardinal for his *red*-faced embarrassment before him (ll. 89–90).

Though the macabre face of Death is not fully disclosed until the speech of the dead king, progressively morbid accents creep into the satiric discourse of death and his victims. Death, addressing the virtuous Carthusian, counsels, 'Longer to lyve/ set not youre memorie. | Though I be lothsom/ as in apparence | Aboue alle men/ deth hath the victorie' (ll. 350–52). The latter's reply to Death might be the only one to upbraid his mordant wit — the devout Carthusian says that he has already long been dead to this world 'By my ordre/ and my professioun' (l. 354). By contrast, dying, for the Emperor, Cardinal, and King, is a humiliatingly specific physical process. They must disrobe utterly for this dance, go to death naked, and reclothe themselves in a white sheet (l. 85). The address of Death to the corpulent abbot, in the same spirit, invokes the macabre rhetoric of decay tinctured with burlesque social satire of a bitter hue:

> Come forth sir Abbot/ with youre brood hatte
> Beeth not abaisshid/ though ye haue right.
> Greet is your hood/ your bely large and fatte
> Ye mote mote come daunce/ though ye be no thing light
> Leve vp your abbey/ to some other wight
> Youre eir is of age/ youre state to occupie
> Who that is fattest/ I haue him behight
> In his graue/ shal soonest putrfie.
>
> (ll. 233–40)

Thus, a Death ever aware of ecclesiastical corruption mocks this stock paradigm of abbatial vice. Nepotism goes hand in hand with soft living and gluttony. This figure's love of life is metaphorically reconfigured as an inability to dance with

Death under his own girth. In a mode of the grotesque matching the moral, his gut swollen in vice is anticipated to be the first to swell with corruption in the grave, a refrain mirrored in the fifteenth-century paraphrase of Ecclesiastes, 'This world fareth as a Fantasye', in the great religious anthologies of the Simeon and Vernon manuscripts: 'Thaugh mon be waxen gret and fat, | Mon melteth a-wey so doth a mouth [*moth*]' (ll. 41–42).

In Lydgate, Death proceeds through society armed only with keen humour (no weapons of death accompany him here). Acerbically, he remarks to the Patriarch that he can never hope to be pope (ll. 126–27). He arrests the Constable, Man of Law, and Sergeant in the legal language of the office they performed in life (ll. 138–39, 465–80, 361–75). The latter responds with the initial vituperation of Henryson's Everyman when confronted by death (above, Chapter 6). The 'lady of great estate' for her part (not unlike Emily Dickinson some centuries later), notes that Death is an inscrutable suitor: 'Deeth hath in erthe/ no lady ne maistresse | And on his daunce/ yet must I nedes foote' (ll. 194–95). Her lament offers the poem's initial deployment (reprised in that of the Abbess, ll. 257–62) of the antifeminist penitential discourse of the loss of beauty, and the vanity of efforts to preserve 'countirfeet fresshnesse' where the preceding masculine roles have predominantly signalled the loss of power, wealth, authority, and dignity (l. 199).

The physical rapture of death is acknowledged as a wrenching one — the King, implicitly wont to dance much in life, remarks, 'I haue not lernyd/ here a forn to daunce | No daunce in sooth of footing so sauage' (ll. 113–15). The minstrel, seized by Death, develops this theme further:

> This new daunce/ is to me so straunge
> Wondir diuerse/ and passingly contrarie
> The dredful fotyng/ doth so ofte chaunge
> And the measures/ so ofte sithes varie.
> (ll. 505–08)

In the aristocratic young squire too we have a victim (just as his counterpart in Chaucer's General Prologue) '[t]hat can [*that knows*] of daunces al the newe gise' (l. 218). Death here refers to the legions of living he has taken unto death, for the first time rhetorically styling the Dance as one of the dead: 'Daunceth with vs/ it wil no bettir be' (l. 222). Heavily inflected by the language of the original French, the Squire replies in a stylized yet poignant acceptance of death in youth, one all but repeated in the subsequent speech of the Squire Amorous: 'A dieu my ladies/ somtime so fressh of face | A dieu beute/ pleasaunce and solas' (ll. 229–30).

The rapture of youth by Death is taken to its ultimate conclusion in Death's address to the infant. Yet in a persona already ameliorated by compassion for the wretched labourer (see below), Death bears crumbs of comfort also for the Child, consoling him, 'Who lengest lyveth/ moost shal suffer woo' (l. 584). The first steps the Child will take are the measures of Death's Dance: 'Be lad in haste/ by fatal ordinaunce | Lerne of newe/ to goo on my daunce' (l. 580–81). The child's speech is rendered in scripturally authorized babble, taken from Jeremiah 1. 6 (reiterated in 14. 13): 'Et dixi a a a Domine Deus ecce nescio loqui quia puer ego sum' (And I said: Ah, ah, ah, Lord God: behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child). The child will learn to speak just as he learns this new dance, and offers an old man's prognostication in his last line:

> A. A. A. o worde I can not speke
> I am so yonge/ I was bore yisterday
> Deeth is so hasty/ on me to be wreke [*avenged*]
> And list no lenger/ to make no delay
> I cam but nowe/ and nowe I goo my way
> Of me no more/ no tale shal be told
> The wil of god/ no man with stond may
> As sone dieth/ a yonge man as an old.
> (ll. 585–92)

To the humble labourer, Death fashions himself as a compassionate liberator from a life of pain:

> Thou laborer/ wiche in sorwe and peine
> Hast lad thi life/ in ful greet trauaile
> Thou most eke daunce/ and therfore not disdeyne
> Ffor if thou do/ it may the not auaile
> And cause why that I the assaile
> Is only this/ from thee to disseuere
> The fals worlde/ that can so folk faile
> He is a fool/ that weneth [*thinks*] to lyve euere.
> (ll. 545–52)

The labourer bitterly acknowledges that death will be the first rest he has ever experienced and admits 'I haue wished/ aftir deeth ful ofte' (l. 553). This is a rhetorical welcome of Death echoed at greater length by the Hermit (ll. 617–24), whose gratitude merits a second speech from Death in approbation of his welcome, one which proves to be Death's last speech of the Dance (ll. 624–30). This

done, the rhetoric of the grave is now adopted not by Death, and not even by one of the living, but rather by 'the kyng ligging ded and eten of wormes'. The face of death, almost always occluded from the reader, is now demonstrably assigned to a human who has fallen into death. Implicitly, we are revisiting the King, who was taken by death in the initial stanzas of the Dance, and thus conclude the dance in 'a warning from the tomb'.[31] In most iconographic representations of the Dance, the King is shown as an unburied yet ravaged corpse, implicitly refusing the grave in order to deliver his warning to the living. In its recumbency, it shows that the Dance is done: a naturalistic end to a sequence of dancing corpses. Similarly, illustrated examples of the *Danse Macabre des femmes* (popular in France in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) culminate with a dead queen, rotting, and yet to be committed to burial.[32]

Lydgate's own translation was never illustrated in its manuscripts, and the identity of the King in this un-illuminated text is clear only from the rubric.[33] In the passages that have ensued since he was first taken by death, he has had time to rot, and to show the physical consequences of death which have not been dwelled on heretofore at any length:

> Ye folke that lokyn/ vpon this portrature
> Biholdyng here/ alle the states daunce
> Seeth what ye bene/ and what is youre nature
> Mete vn to wormes/ not ellis in substaunce
> And haue this mirrour euere in remenbraunce
> How I lie here/ somtyme crownyd kyng
> To alle estates a trewe resemblaunce
> That wormes food/ is fine of oure lyuyng.
> (ll. 633–40)

This speech is expressly the only one to emanate from a dead person in the text. Death successively appears as an active entity, who in the text merely bears the appearance of the dead, not their voices or perspective. In the dead king's speech the reader is reminded not of Death in his own hyperbolic rhetoric of social satire, but rather of the inevitable physical consequences of joining the similarly in-

[31] The phrase is Woolf's (*The English Religious Lyric*, p. 351). In the manuscripts of group B, these verses are not assigned to the dead king.

[32] Illustration in BnF, MS fr. 995, fol. 44r. *Danse Macabré*, ed. and trans. by Tukey Harrison, p. 131.

[33] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 351.

evitable Dance of Death. From a catalogue of social grotesques, none of which may be an attractive or convincing mirror for the audience, who would not necessarily imagine themselves amidst such a list of venal figures, a stark reminder is addressed directly to the reader.[34] The dead king adopts in his speech the traditional rhetoric of the physical consequences of the grave. This posture is imitated by another paradoxically 'regal' figure of humiliation in death in the figure of Lazarus in the Towneley Play. This is a figure psychologized as an entity who understands what is like to be dead.[35] In his dying (and coming back to life) he can report with experience and authority:

> No kyng, no knight, no wight in wede,
> From dede haue made hym seese,
> Ne flesh he was wont to fede, it shal be wormes mese [*mess*].
> Yore dede is wormes coke [*food*];
> Your myrroure here ye loke
> And let me be youre boke,
> Your sampill take by me.
>
> (ll. 116–22)

This Lazarus graphically makes monstrance of his injured flesh for his audience. Restoration to life has not restored his appearance: his decomposition is implicitly permanent, a perpetual mirror for those yet to experience death. The figure of Lazarus is implicit in *Sir Amadace*, and is the explicit object of detestation in Dunbar (see above, Chapter 1). Here, the voice of every (dead) man, so familiar from the lyric mode, is denied the anonymity of grave, adopting instead the name of the most famous revenant of the Middle Ages. The Lazarus figure voices the rhetoric of the grave commonplace in the literature of mortality — a voice which can be, according to the taste of the writer, assigned to a speaker constructed as the anonymous dead, an indeterminate sermonizer figure, or Death itself.

Similarly in the N-Town Play, Death makes (upon slaying Herod) a speech to the audience fully cognizant of the coalescence of his body with that of Lazarus, and the universal body of dead Everyman.[36] *Mors* becomes death in Man, not merely Death. In describing himself he is at once the energetic spearman and dancer of Death, and the embodiment of his victims:

[34] Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric*, p. 352.

[35] *The Raising of Lazarus*, ed. by Stevens and Cawley, I, 425–31.

[36] *The Slaughter of the Innocents and the Death of Herod*, in *The N-Town Play*, ed. by Spector, I, 187–97; hereafter references to this work are cited in the text by line number.

Thow I be nakyd and pore of array
And wurmys knawe me al abowte,
Yit loke ye drede me nyth and day;
For whan Deth comyth ye stande in dowte!
Evyn lyke to me, as I yow say,
Shull all ye be here in this rowte.
(ll. 264–69)

Death adopts, in these two examples from fifteenth-century English biblical drama, the visual motifs of decay familiar from verbal deployments of the macabre in the self-aware bodies of *The Three Dead* and *The Awntyrs off Arthure* (above, Chapter 5). Death shares the body of his own victims. His attributes are a function of the humiliation and ugliness of death: nudity, vermicular infestation, and a bareness of skin and flesh commensurate with a bareness of clothing. Firmly clinging to the persona of predatory Death, and not simply a passive corpse, he becomes a rapacious figure who will denude his victims of apparel and life:

Whan I yow chalange at my day,
I xal yow make ryght low to lowth
And nakyd for to be.
(ll. 270–72)

Yet, fundamentally, he admits himself to be a corpse who has experienced death and its decay. Here, then, a momentary access of pity is suggested as we are urged to see the ravages of death *upon* the very body of Death. The personification of death is humanized as his own victim, a victimhood exemplified in the wounds of the grave. The corpse of Death imitates the posture of Christ as Man of Sorrows (see below, Conclusion), conscious of his wounds, and ostentatiously displaying them for the study and internalization of his audience:

Amongys wormys, as I yow telle,
Vndyr the erthe xul ye dwelle,
And thei xul etyn both flesch and felle,
As thei haue don me.
(ll. 281–84)

It is in the ostentatious presentation of the decayed bodies of the macabre dead in late medieval writing that we easily recognize the posture of the other predominant iconographic and literary vision of death of the Middle Ages: the crucified Christ.[37] Where the three dead kings berate their sons, 'Lokys on my bonus that

[37] Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 129, Plate 11.

blake bene and bare!' (l. 106), we recall Christ in other modes urging his beloved to see and affectively condole his wounds, reiterated in countless sermons, visions, and lyrics of the Middle Ages. This is an association of eschatological actors witnessed in a cosmic mode in *Death and Liffe* (and its model, *Piers Plowman*). Ultimately, in Renaissance art, the enmeshment of the rhetorical and pictorial gestures of self-exhibiting Death and the wounded Christ is severed with a recurring visual motif deployed by Holbein and Cranach (themselves great exponents of the medieval inheritance of macabre art) in the art of the Reformation. Here, in a new motif reiterated in print and in panel paintings for altarpieces, and embedded in representations of the Crucifixion, and allegories of the Old and New Law, Christ tramples on skeletal Death (with the devil) at Resurrection. Death, in triumphant Christ, has finally met a dancing partner who floors him.[38]

[38] For a new study of this theme in the context of Reformation controversies of art, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (London: Reaktion, 2004), which reproduced examples such as Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Wittenberg Altarpiece* (p. 259) and Cranach the Younger's *Weimar Altarpiece* (p. 264).

Conclusion (Epitaph)

A Handful of Dust

Inasmuch as the Dance of Death's frieze-sequence of dramatized dying concludes with the speaking portrait of the macabre king 'ligging ded and eten of wormes', so too does it become the last image of the present study, an addition to the Office of the Dead in the Hours of René of Anjou in BL, MS Egerton 1070, an extravagant and perversely beautiful portrait of the macabre cadaver, fully realized as an emblem of ongoing decay, *en transi* between the states of enfleshment and skeletalization (Plate 11). This image is the logical coalescence (or reunification) of the themes of the macabre in the Dance and *The Legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead*. In its own context, René's figure of death is a mid-century insert into a lavish royal manuscript (along with eight other miniatures). Folio 53^{r}, the dead king, is a supplemental amplification of the language of its Office of the Dead which, in this manuscript, had hitherto only the most decorous pictorial representations of death and praying for the dead: closed coffins, and singing choirs. The dead king, believed to be a portrayal *en transi* of René himself, remedies this lack of morbid horrors in the office's existing programme of illustrations rather comprehensively.

René's death in 1480 might possibly have prompted Edward IV of England's stated wish for a double cadaver tomb (René was father to Queen Margaret, consort of Henry VI, whom Edward deposed). It was only René who achieved his macabre ambitions for his memorial, of course, and his double tomb, with a crowned, macabre figure of Death/rotting René, and recumbent, lifelike effigy (a unique reversal of roles, according to Erwin Panofsky) stood in Angers Cathedral until the French Revolution.[1] The figure of death in his Book of Hours anticipates this final gesture; the tomb itself, begun by the early 1450s, is coeval with the

[1] Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, pp. 65–67.

miniatures added to the Hours, a perfect contemporary reduction of the idea of his own mortality for daily introspection by the Duke and King René.

It is this morally beneficial *enjoyment* of the visualized flesh of the dead, commended to us by poets, preachers, or painters, which has been the principal concern of the study. The graphic modes of constructing the dead by enumerating the physical transformations of the grave — the womb filled with worms, the hollow eye sockets, the grinning mouth, the exposed bones of the body — all conform to the medieval rhetoric of *descriptio* in its piecing together the body from familiar, and reusable, verbal material, a process equally liable to be deployed in evoking beauty, and ugliness, and in the affective mode, the etched agonies of the Man of Sorrows and every dead man. Where Christ is encapsulated in his tortures in word and image, so too are the dead abbreviated for literary and iconographic transmission in the reiteration of the wounds inflicted by the grave and by the worms of the earth. Mortality is the theme of the macabre body, immortality the promise of the Christian body. Each is a figure for interiorization: through the former the onlooker is to understand his mortality; in the latter, Christ's humanity:

> Abyd, gud men, & hald your pas
> [...]
> Behald my heved, behald my fete,
> And of thy misdeeds luke thou lete,
> Behald of my grisely face,
> And of thy sins ask aleggance.[2]

These are lines (in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson poet. 175, one of the texts of *The Gast of Gy*) spoken by Christ in the *siste viator* mode as pendant epitaph, yet could just as easily be spoken from every dead man — the Lazarus of Towneley, the Death in the Herod of N-Town — brandishing his transformations in death; or as here, in a true, classically modelled epitaph, more decorously eliding his physical monstrosity in proclaiming the universality and futurity of his condition for all, in a lyric scribbled in a flyleaf of a fifteenth-century manuscript:

> All ye that passe be thys holy place
> Both spiritual and temporall of every degree

[2] *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by Carleton Brown, 2nd edn, rev. by G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 59–60.

> Remembyr yourself well during tyme & space
> I was as you are now, and as I, ye shall be.[3]

The macabre idiom has been discussed here as a point of reference for medieval writing of the dead — not simply apostrophes to death, but as a means of orienting narratives of the dead themselves, in the full range of their potential reception by their audiences. The macabre, as we have continually observed, is derived from the responses of pictorial art to longstanding sermon rhetoric; but the specific visual idiom itself becomes a point of reference for later medieval texts that allude to the forms which disseminated macabre iconography: the *Danse Macabre*, *The Legend of the Three Living and Three Dead*, and the *transi*-tomb.

Yet this book sees the idea of the macabre in its 'pre-iconographic' verbal forms also, and we have traced, throughout the study, the ways in which the dead are described, and pressed into exemplary action and moral usefulness, using elements of the traditional languages of mortality, seen not only in didactic modes, but in other narrative genres such as romance and burlesque. The macabre mode is employed as an aesthetic, not merely a monitory principle, becoming part of the store of imagery to render the dead as an elaborate literary motif. Thus in English literature of the Middle Ages the macabre visual idiom, and the rhetorical traditions behind it, has been seen to accentuate literary and didactic configurations of the dead. Introduced as the supernatural other in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and in *Death and Liffe*, the dead, and personified Death as cadaver, both indicate the currency of the macabre as a recognizable and transmissible motif in medieval artistic and literary discourse.

This study has also sought a discernment of the dead in other forms, not merely the macabre archetype of the corpse. We have seen how the representation of the incorporeal dead in *The Gast of Gy* and 'Als I Lay', eschewing the macabre, breezily accept the difficulties in rendering an invisible visual subject. Indeed, the invisible *Gy* freely adopts the rhetoric of the debates of Body and Soul, and displays a mode of describing the dead far more detailed and elaborate (paradoxically) than some ostensibly less problematic, body-oriented representations of the dead. In exempla from *An Alphabet of Tales* and from the *Gesta Romanorum*, we have noticed how the discussion of the physical attributes of the dead can be utterly absent. This may be partly attributable to the dictates of narrative logic (tales that describe the recent and not long-dead), yet undoubtedly the eschewal

[3] *Secular Lyrics of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. by Rossell Hope Robbins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 119.

of anything but the most demotic of narrative styles for these texts, designed to be heard, dictates the absence of certain literary effects and extended sequences of description, particularly the rhetorically self-aware descriptions mandated by the macabre idiom, where sight, no longer action, becomes the object of narrative.

A further point to emerge from this study, irrespective of the willingness or ability of writers to engage with a traditional morbidity or an explicitly visual discourse of the macabre, is a more nebulous concept of the dead as a locus of anxiety in themselves: instinctive, physiological, and superstitious. We have discussed the importance of this theme as a method of critically engaging both with texts that lack literary features, as well as noting its use in richer narratives. We have examined the fear of the dead as a dramatizing principle which can both complement the macabre idiom and to some extent supplant it, replacing an anxiety predicated on visual response with a fear localized around dramatic gesture, unpredictability, and innate human anxiety. Thus, we have witnessed the operation of the theme of the fear of dead amid the absence of specific visual references in some narratives as a method of visualizing the dead by action, not appearance. The dead are seen as ill-defined and unstable entities in these shorter exempla, and also crucially in the romance *Sir Amadace* where the implacable dead justify by their deeds the supernatural apprehension they may prompt in the living. Ultimately the macabre lends outward expression to internal themes, whether of morbidity, fear of the dead, or the contemplation of mortality. The contours of macabre decay are seen as a versatile motif with the potential to be used in conjunction with mannerist portrayals of the grotesque in *Death and Liffe* in whose representation of death is seen a synthesis of the monstrous and the macabre.

Despite the energy and art expended in portraying the dead and death in medieval literature, it is not ultimately superstitious fear of the dead in themselves which is the object of macabre idiom but productive *recognition* where the audience identifies not merely an objectified corpse but his or her own future. In fashioning their representations of mortality in the macabre idiom, writers and artists of the Middle Ages ensure that none ignore the face of death, and the mirror of mortality from which our futures peer back. Thus the use of the macabre idiom in a literary mode becomes the means by which this mirror is vocalized for its audience. It is a reflection of the future of the audience which self-consciously recommends its study, as we have seen in several texts that have been analysed here. The *speculum* constituted in the macabre face of mortal man is made explicit in the words of the third king from *The Three Dead*: 'Makis your merour be me! My myrthus bene mene!' (l. 120). Similarly, Henryson's three dead

skulls recommend to us the *reflective* mode of regarding the dead which is at all times implicit in the iconography of the macabre:

> Quhan thow lukis on this suth examplair
> Off thy self, man, thow may be richt unbald.
> (ll. 7–8)

> Heir sowld be your study and repair,
> And think as thus all your heidis mon be.
> (ll. 47–48)

This is a mirror held for an extra-narrative audience, as well as one for an internal one, where Guinevere is told my her mother in *The Awntyrs off Arthure:*

> For al thi fressh foroure [*fur garments*],
> Muse on my mirrour;
> For, king and emperour,
> Thus dight shul ye be.
> (ll. 166–69)

The literary invocation of the macabre idiom can accentuate the commonplace metaphor of reflection and complement the iconographic mode's implicit emphasis on sight and reflective internalization. Even in medieval macabre art, such as the early fourteenth-century Psalter of Robert de Lisle, the dead imitate and parody the gestures of the living, implicitly assuming the posture of reflections. Here living and dead are arrayed opposite each other as reverse and complementary images without recourse to the literalizing use of the mirror witnessed in later art (see Plate 4). Our cover image, the beginning of the Office of the Dead in the incomplete late fifteenth-century northern Italian Hours of Dionora of Urbino (MS Yates Thompson 7, fol. 174^{v}) shows us the coalescence (reflection) of Death in the bodies of the dead. The patroness, still with her blond hair, becomes in herself the embodiment of her own death who can upbraid her (similarly macabre) reflection in her looking glass with a skeletal finger. She is not merely in a naturalistic sense her future corpse, but death her-/itself, who can admonish both her and every reader. Femininity is always lent its own significances in the macabre mode, as we have seen throughout this book; it must constitute its own reproof to specifically feminine attributes. And here, golden hair (silently echoing the scriptural reproof of whited sepulchres concealing horrors) merely gilds a bare skull; gorgeous clothes form only a magnificent sarcophagus for rotted flesh.

Thus, in the literary and iconographic art of the macabre, we are reassured that it is no longer necessary to peer into the grave to learn the consequences of mortality. Where books are commonly regarded as mirrors in almost every aspect of medieval literary exegesis — whether as mirrors of history or conduct — here, in the idiom of the macabre, text, image, and performance combine as a reflective surface for the audience, where the dead return to greet us — as in the Towneley Play of *Lazarus*—with the image, testimony, and mirror of death:

> Yore dede is wormes coke [*food*];
> Your myrroure here ye loke
> And let me be youre boke,
> Your sampill take by me.
> (ll. 119–24)

Ultimately, the representation of the dead in any aspect of medieval art and writing represents the consequences of death and sin for its audience, and becomes part of the medieval tradition of displaying the dead for the benefit of the living. The dead, in any cultural system, are essential to human experience. In adopting their macabre face as the true mirror for the living in medieval English narrative, they ensure that they, and the thought of mortality, do not leave our memory, and press continuously on our imagination.

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